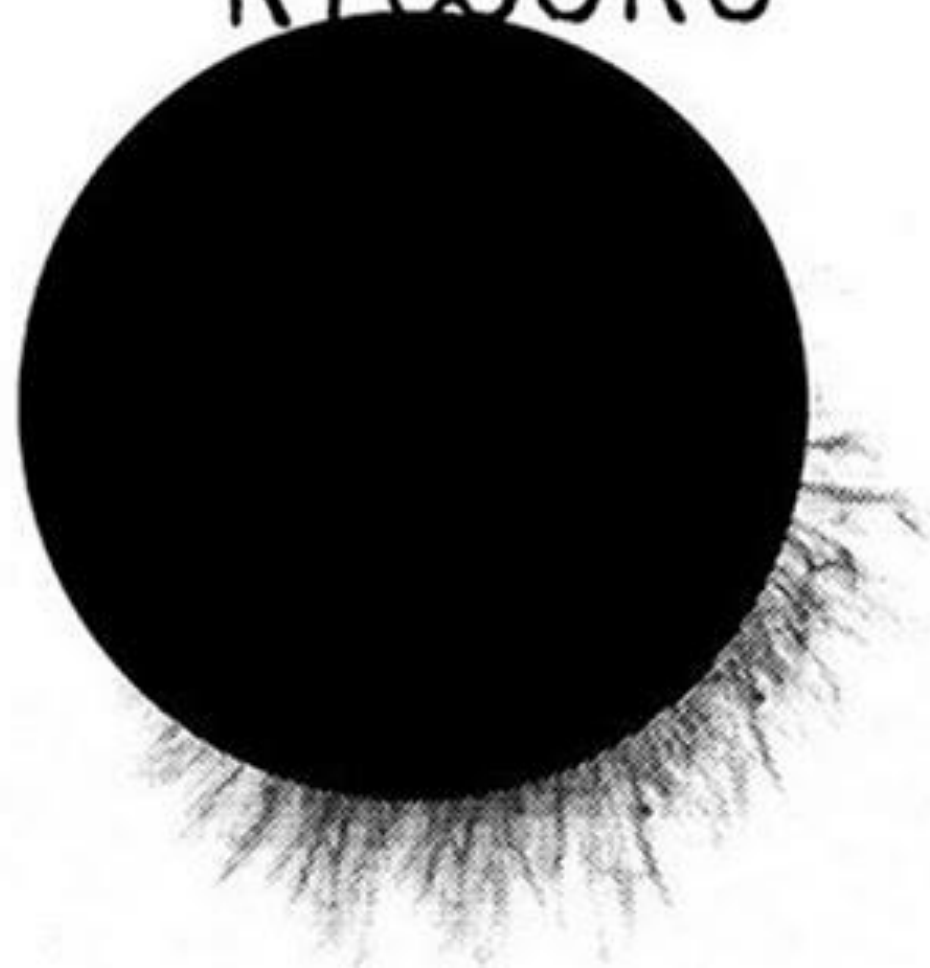


THE
SUMMER OF
THE
UBUME

NATSUHIKO
KYOGOKU



To all those who take this book into their hands:
the blessings of rose and cross be with you.

Copyright © 2009 by Natsuhiko Kyogoku

All rights reserved.

Published by Vertical, Inc., New York.

Originally published in Japanese as *Ubume no natsu*
by Kodansha, 1994.

ISBN 978-1-934287-25-5

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

Vertical, Inc.
1185 Avenue of the Americas, 32nd Floor
New York, NY 10036
www.vertical-inc.com



The Ubume—*Night Procession of One Hundred Ghosts* (part one, light)

Ubume—

...The ubume, night courtesan, or empyreal maiden, which is called a demon bird or sometimes the "grey heron." It is said that wherever it passes, igned fatui will appear. Thus where the grey heron-lights are seen, or the will-o'-the-wisp, it is the doing of this bird...

—"77493"

Unknown

Ubume—

Being a type of demon, often possessed of a human soul, frequently seen in Jingzhou in Hubei. When the ubume wears feathers it becomes a winged bird, and when the feathers are removed, it becomes a woman. When a woman who is with child dies, she becomes an ubume. Thus, the ubume has two breasts upon its chest, and wants nothing more than to steal the child of a living woman and make it her own. Therefore, houses with infants should never hang their clothes outside at night, for the bird will come and mark them with a drop of blood. The infant will then be visited by fright convulsions and disease, these being called maladies of misfortune. It should be noted that these birds are, without exception, female. They come at night in the late summer to bewilder men.

—Compendium of Materia Medica

Li Shizhen, Ming Dynasty

Concerning the Origin of the Ubume—

...Occurring when a woman dies with a child unborn in her womb, and the body is then discarded improperly. Should the child not perish, but emerge in the wild, then the soul of the mother will take form, and clutching her babe to her she walks at night. The crying of that babe is called the birth-wail. The ubume appears weak and drenched from the waist down in blood...

—Collection of Miraculous Tales

Unknown, Junkyo 4 (1687)

Concerning the Ubume—

Of all the tales told, that of the ubume is the most confounding. It is said that, when a woman who is with child passes away, her attachment to the babe takes physical form. She appears then as an apparition, drenched in blood from the waistdown, and crying like a bird, saying "wobaryo, wobaryo." Presented with stories of people transforming into such creatures after they die, how can we truly believe in Hell? It is beyond understanding.

—Report on One Hundred Stories

Yamaoka Motoyoshi, Junkyo 3 (1686)

Maybe I...

have just awoken.

Where is this place?

What am I doing?

I float in blood-warm fluid.

I hear a voice.

What is she angry about?

Or maybe she is sad.

I am completely at peace.

I clutch my thumb in my fist.

My belly is open to the outside.

My gut is attached to some other place.

Now I feel

it's getting colder.

Maybe I...

am waking now.

Mother?

At the very top of the hill, where the lackadaisical, interminable slope petered out at last, sat my destination: Kyogokudo.

The early rains of summer were nearly over, leaving the sun to beat down on me from a hazy sky as I walked. There wasn't a single tree, or anything else offering shade, anywhere along that hill road—just endless weathered oil-clay walls running along both sides. I had no idea what was behind them. It could have been houses, a temple, or a nursing center of some kind. There could be parks or gardens back there. The walls were too large for ordinary homes.

The hill road has no name.

Well, it might have had a name, I just didn't know what it was. I'd been climbing that slope on my way up to Kyogokudo once a month—no, more than that, maybe two or three times monthly—for more than two years. As to how many trips that makes in total, I've no idea.

Strangely, my recollection of the street and all the things along it from my house to where the hill begins was vague at best. Not only did I not know the name of the sloping street, I wasn't really sure what the neighborhood itself was called, much less what lay behind its many barriers.

A cloud swept swiftly over the sun, doing nothing to reduce the heat.

Around two-thirds of the way up the slope, I stopped to catch my breath.

Almost all the way to the top of the hill, side roads appear, veering off to the left and right. The oil-clay walls follow, turning off to the sides, and beyond that point the street is lined with old houses interspersed with stands of bamboo. Go a little farther, and you start noticing small hardware stores and shops selling sundry goods. Continue on straight for a while, and you'll wind up in the middle of the shopping district that serves the next neighborhood over.

So Kyogokudo sits on the border between two neighborhoods. Maybe the street address even lists it as being in the other neighborhood; I don't know. I had been worried about customers being able to find it, on the outskirts of town as it is, but maybe it was somewhat more convenient to get there from the other side.

Kyogokudo is a used bookstore.

The proprietor is an old friend of mine. I'm not convinced that he's truly interested in doing business, as most of the books on his shelves aren't anything I could imagine anyone ever buying. Nor is his location particularly suitable for selling books. He tells me that he has so many regulars he's never wanting for customers, but I have my suspicions.

His big sellers are academic texts, he claims, old Chinese books, and the like—the sort of thing most used bookstores steer well clear of. This, he says, has the effect that whenever another local store picks up something along those lines, they pass it on to him, making Kyogokudo truly the only place around to find certain classes of books. Once the scholars and researchers who live in the area realized this, voilà—a steady customer base. Supposedly, connoisseurs come great distances to sample his wares. But of course this is all according to the proprietor himself, so the truth of the matter is as shadowy as the bamboo thickets along the street outside.

Next door to the bookstore, on the near side, is a soba noodle shop, with a rather meager stand of bamboo growing around it; just past Kyogokudo is a small wood, and in that wood there is a small shrine. Originally, the proprietor was a priest there—officially, in fact, he still is—and had been known to read a prayer or two at festival time, though I had never seen him doing anything of the sort.

I looked up at the sign above the door, "Kyogokudo," written by the bookseller himself in handwriting so eccentric it was impossible to tell whether it was very good or incredibly bad; then I ducked down to enter through the open door. My friend was there, reading some old clothbound book, his face twisted in its customary scowl. He looked so grim you'd think someone's parents had died.

I made a noncommittal noise that probably didn't qualify as a greeting and dropped into a chair by the counter, looking up at the stacks of unsorted books piled all around. Unconsciously, I was hunting for some newly arrived, as-yet-undiscovered treasure.

"You know what you are?" the bookseller said, his eyes never leaving the page. "Restless, that's what. If you're going to say hello, say hello. If you're going to sit, sit. If you're going to read a book, read. How am I supposed to concentrate with you fidgeting like that?"

I ignored him, instead scanning the dusty jacket of the book he held.

"Well?" I asked. "Got anything interesting, Kyogokudo?"

I always referred to him by the name of his store.

"Not at all," he replied immediately. "Why do you think I'm reading this? But you know—though maybe you have different standards for what constitutes 'interesting' than I do—there's no such thing in this world as an *uninteresting* book. Any book is interesting; and not just when it's new. Even books you've already read can be quite fascinating. It just takes a little more effort to get there, that's all.

"So as it happens, there are plenty of interesting books here for you—and not only the ones in those unsorted stacks you're ogling, but back here on the shelves where they've been gathering dust for years. They're easy enough to

find. Just pick one and buy it! Tell you what, I'll even cut you a little deal," he finished, barely pausing for breath. My friend looked up from his reading at last, and grinned.

"Sure," I replied, proceeding to evade his sales pitch with the ease of long practice. "But I have a hard time picking up a book that doesn't strike some chord with me. Oh, I'm sure that if you gave it the time, any book *could* be interesting. I'm just not *interested* in that kind of reading. Maybe that's where we're different."

As if with a will of their own, our conversations had a way of growing, like an unchecked paranoia, until even a chat with seemingly innocent beginnings would balloon into an outrageous debate on the state of nations or some similarly grandiose theme. Perhaps because I enjoyed this, I would often divert the conversation with a purposefully tangential response, just to see what my friend would say.

He looked at me then as if I were some kind of remarkable idiot. "Such dispassion!" he breathed with disdain. "I know of no other reader more dispassionate than you. For starters, most of my customers have far more *fondness* for their books. But you, you read with several times the avarice of anyone else, yet your lack of attachment to the books themselves is almost criminal. How can you live with yourself, selling off everything the moment you've read it?"

In truth, I usually did end up selling eighty percent of the books I read. And whenever I got rid of them, my eccentric friend would grouse and whine. Yet, no matter how much he complained, at the end of the day it was him, sitting right there across that very counter, who bought them back.

"Isn't your entire business model predicated on people like me?" I rejoined. "If no one sold their books, used booksellers would be like...like fishermen who couldn't catch fish. Everything on your shelves here you caught from people who sell their books—all unsavory characters like myself, I'm sure."

"Now you're comparing books to fish," Kyogokudo grumbled, and then fell silent.

As I was usually the one getting talked into a corner in our little exchanges, I had to admit that seeing my friend at a loss for a snappy comeback felt a little good. I quickly spoke again, lest this rare opportunity pass.

"Yes, and why not? Your books are fish, and you're a fishmonger—the worst kind—who tastes each of his wares before he puts them on the shelf! How is the customer supposed to feel, buying books the master of a store has already read?"

"Bah," he replied. "The books in a used bookstore belong to the store's owner. These aren't on loan from some publisher, nor do I sell them on commission. Every book in this store I bought with my own money. Whether I read them or use them for a pillow, that's no grounds for anyone to complain.

Look, my customers come to *me* asking me to sell them *my* books. And I, understanding the customer's needs, give them what they want. Oh, and I might mention, the book I'm reading now isn't for sale," he concluded, sounding pleased with himself. He turned the clothbound volume he held so that I could read its cover.

The book he was reading was something from the Edo Period [1603-1868]—a collection by the painter Toriyama Sekien entitled *An Assortment of One Hundred Jar-Ghosts*. This was, as he said, most certainly a prized possession and not for sale. Nonetheless it was true that he read nearly every book he sold. Not that there was anything really wrong with that, but I often saw cause to chide him for it.

Kyogokudo's voracity as a reader was yet another piece of evidence leading me to suspect the depth of his commitment to his professed occupation. As far as I could see, he only took in the books he wanted to read himself. It was merely a happy coincidence that his interests ranged so ridiculously far and wide that he often happened to have books his customers wanted too.

Kyogokudo's grin grew even wider.

"Well, come on up."

This was his way of giving me permission to join him in the back.

"My wife's not here so there's no coffee. You'll have to make do with weak tea—not that your ignorant tongue would know the difference anyway," the bookseller informed me with his usual lack of tact. His hand went to the table—which was stained in the psychedelic black-and-orange whorls of *tsugaru* lacquerware—and picked up a teapot that had surely been sitting there for a long time before I arrived.

"What are you talking about? I might not look like much, but I can sniff out a blend with the best of them."

"Surely you're joking?" Kyogokudo laughed. "Or don't you remember the time when you ordered a Columbian coffee at that café and the waitress brought you mocha by mistake? You went on about how you were drinking Columbian that day, but preferred the tangy bitterness of mocha—never realizing what a fool you seemed. Oh, I understand how wannabe two-bit hacks such as yourself can't pass up any opportunity to act as if you know something, but really, try thinking of the rest of us, forced to listen to you blather on. It's really quite embarrassing."

The tea he set before me was the third or fourth cup brewed from the same leaves. I had worked up a sweat climbing the hill to the bookstore, however; so weak as it was, the tea tasted rather good.

The back room of the bookshop was large enough for a floor of ten *tatami* mats, and the walls were covered floor to ceiling in books, making the area almost indistinguishable from the store proper. And to think, this was Kyogokudo's living space. His better half frequently complained about the dust, and

I could sympathize. Many of these books were supposed to be for sale—and here they were invading his private quarters. Or maybe it was the opposite, as he himself had suggested, and these were really all his own books that had spilled over into the shop, leaving him no choice but to start selling them.

Whenever I joined him in the back, the shop would close for business. Many evenings we became so lost in our discussions we would forget even to eat dinner.

I began my adult life as a researcher, studying slime molds and related organisms with a meager amount of funding from my university, but eventually this failed to generate enough income to pay the bills, and I began writing for my keep. The best part about freelance writing is the flexible hours. Excepting the few days before a deadline, it was perfectly reasonable for me to while away an entire afternoon doing nothing in particular. Kyogokudo, however, was in his own roundabout way a retailer. At first, I feared my visits must be a nuisance, but since—as I have said before—he didn't seem concerned with actually selling anything, I soon stopped worrying about it at all.

Though the friend who sat before me was quite generous when it came to sharing wasted time, he showed not the least shred of comprehension when it came to my writing. Of course, though I might fancy what I wrote to be literature, mostly it consisted of articles for scientific adventure magazines for boys, or anonymous columns in suspect tabloids, because these were what paid the bills. When he called me a hack, I couldn't really protest.

"Well now, Mr. Sekiguchi," Kyogokudo said, putting a hand-rolled cigarette to his lips, "what have you come to talk about today?"

My acquaintance with Kyogokudo goes back some fifteen or so years now, to the time when we were both students at university. As a student, he had given an impression of ill health, so much so that one could have mistaken him for a chronic pneumonia patient—one that sat round the clock reading difficult books with a difficult expression on his face.

The taint of depression clung to me in those days. I never fit in with the jock crowd, nor was I a playboy of any standing, which meant that I spent most of my time alone—except for the companionship of this one eccentric fellow who, for some inexplicable reason, took a liking to me.

We were as different as two people can be. Where I was taciturn and introverted, he was a gifted talker with a surprisingly wide social circle. Thus it was that under his influence I found myself mingling with the kinds of people I should rightly have been avoiding, frequently finding myself in conversations where I had nothing to say.

While it would have made sense for me, in my gloom, to outright reject this turn of events, what I really couldn't comprehend was the evident displeasure with which my friend dragged me into his world. If he didn't like it,

it was his to end; yet he listened to my stories, disparaging me as a fool and an idiot all the while, and in the end becoming furious every time. I think that, perhaps, Kyogokudo actually liked getting angry in those days.

The end result was that I got so swept up in it all that before I knew it my depression was cured. Looking back on it now, I have to admit that my eccentric friend was probably the best possible medicine for someone with clinical depression like me—someone whose emotions had lost their natural rise and fall, whose interest in the world outside had shrunk and wilted.

Our conversations fascinated me. Kyogokudo possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of countless things that had absolutely nothing to do with daily life. He was particularly well-versed in the religions, customs, and oral traditions of the world. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, even *onmyodo* divination and *shugendo* asceticism—his passion for the stuff knew no bounds. What I had to offer him in return was the understanding of neurology, psychiatry, and psychology I had picked up during my treatment for depression.

So it was that we could often be found in lengthy debate, hashing out this or that obscure point. Though our discussions doubtlessly differed greatly from those of more typical students belaboring the popular topics of the day, what we lacked in pertinence we made up for with breadth: from politics to the care and feeding of goldfish to how cute the waitress at the local eatery was—everything was on the table.

But this was all a long time ago, when we were young.

More than a decade had passed since then. Two years earlier, I had gotten hitched and moved into my current residence, and, in the process, quit the research on slime molds I had been doing since graduation to focus on the writing I had been producing in only meager amounts up till then. At just the same time, Kyogokudo left his position as a lecturer in higher education and dedicated himself to being a priest—or so I had thought, until he built an addition onto his home and opened up the used bookstore.

Since then, whenever I was in need of material, or something interesting happened in the news, I would head for that musty enclave to engage him in a long rambling discussion just like those of our student days. Though I suppose you could argue that this was part of my job as a writer, I think I made my visits more to recall how it had felt back then, before life made so many demands on us. Kyogokudo, dangerously thin as a student, had fattened up somewhat after graduating and getting married, but his unhealthy, sour expression hadn't changed in the least.

"Do you think," I began quietly, "That it's possible for a woman to be with child for twenty whole months?"

Don... Don...

A drum sounded in the distance.

Someone practicing for a summer festival, most likely.

Kyogokudo slowly blew out a puff of smoke, not appearing surprised at my topic or even the least bit interested. "You came all the way here, to me—not to a midwife or an obstetrician—to ask this? Which means, I suppose, you think I possess some privileged, arcane knowledge about this matter that a midwife or doctor would not?"

"Well, if you put it that way—no, I didn't expect anything in particular from you. I'm just saying, supposing there was this woman who had been pregnant for twenty whole months... Her belly would be about twice the size of a regular pregnant woman's, right? And yet she shows no signs of giving birth. If this were true, wouldn't it be out of the ordinary? Wouldn't you find it...strange?"

"There is nothing that is strange in this world, Sekiguchi."

This was something Kyogokudo said so often it was sort of like a verbal tic for him. No, call it his trademark expression. If one took his words at face value, they sounded like the embodiment of modern rationalism, but in fact his reasoning was distinctly his own.

My friend took a deep drag on the remaining stub of his cigarette and scowled. "The only things that exist in the world are those which are meant to exist; the only things that happen are those which are meant to happen. Because we think the tiny fragments of knowledge and experience we possess are enough to encompass the entire universe, the moment we run across something outside that experience, we say 'my, isn't that strange,' and 'ooh, how bizarre.' How can people who don't even know their own true nature or provenance claim to understand the world? Bah!"

"People"—by which you mean me," I clarified. "So I don't understand everything in the world—I acknowledge that I don't. But is it so wrong for me to refer to that which I don't understand as 'strange'?"

"I wasn't talking about you, *per se*—" Kyogokudo muttered. He reached for an object that looked like a small jar, which had been sitting next to the ashtray, and pulled it toward him. He rested his hand on it as our conversation continued. "I meant in general."

"Whatever." I gave him a pout. "Look, I admit I'm only savvy to things that fall within the realm of old-fashioned common sense, as you say. That's why I come here like this to talk to you."

"Now you're making it sound like I'm in possession of some uncommon insight. But the fact of the matter is I'm ten times more a creature of common

sense than you. Don't get me wrong: common sense, culture—these things are very important. Yet they're only effective tools within certain boundaries. To think we can use them to understand anything and everything in creation is just arrogance."

I frowned. "What's gotten under your skin?" It seemed as though, out of the few words I had said thus far, Kyogokudo had come upon something he disliked. If that was the case, the discussion I'd anticipated might be doomed from the outset. When my friend found a topic he liked—even something as banal as the proper placement of bathroom slippers—he could talk about it all day, but when he hit a topic he didn't care for, he had a habit of wresting the conversation away from it all together. That said, on this particular day I was quite interested to see exactly which direction he would try to take things.

"Hmph," he snorted. "Let's suppose, for argument's sake, that this abnormally pregnant woman exists. Now, typically, she'd be looked at by a doctor. It being an unusual case, as soon as treatment was over, there would be an announcement about it in one form or another, and I would have heard about it. Unfortunately, I know of no such case in the medical literature. So perhaps this woman is still in treatment, and her doctor chose to divulge this information to you and you alone. But why would he do that? You don't go revealing personal information about a patient to complete strangers, and it doesn't make sense for a doctor to consult a neophyte like you, who doesn't know medicine from a hole in the ground. Even assuming that he had, you wouldn't then come to me. Thus I must conclude your informant is someone other than a doctor."

Kyogokudo paused, raising an eyebrow at me. "So, perhaps the pregnant woman herself or someone in her family came to talk to you directly. Because they couldn't consult a doctor for some reason, maybe, or they couldn't trust the doctor they were currently seeing, or something along those lines. Yet this still begs the question: why go to an essayist? Nor is it likely you were chosen at random to share such a secret. Thus it's probably wisest to assume that this isn't some privileged knowledge that you alone possess, but something known by an indeterminate, large number of people—what we like to call, in the common parlance, a 'rumor.' A lowbrow, common rumor with absolutely no basis in scientific fact, no less.

"Now it becomes painfully clear that everyone who has heard this rumor, yourself included, has infused it with the kind of hyperbole we find in a ghost story or some dramatist's moral play. 'It's a curse,' they say, or 'karma'—you know that there are even idiots who think *science* applies to this kind of foolishness? They call it parapsychology or some such. Suffice it to say that you're here because you want me to legitimize this poppycock by coming up with some explanation for how it could be possible. Am I right? I can see this is all leading toward one of those tales of awe and wonder you write for those

muckraking tabloids. But I regret to inform you you'll get no such satisfaction from me!"

Kyogokudo paused for a breath at last, taking a sip of weak tea.

"Well, that's not a very nice thing to say," I retorted, but the truth of the matter was that, while not exactly correct, he wasn't entirely wrong, either. I would have let the matter drop there, but my friend wasn't finished.

"What's not nice is you trying to use me when you know I detest this kind of ridiculous conjecture. Somehow everything I say to you winds up coming out in a story about ghosts or hauntings."

"But you love talking about ghosts."

"I never said I didn't. Of course I enjoy ghost stories as an act of creative imagination. And we have to look at fairy tales and their ilk if we want to understand our ancestors' culture or spiritual life. Yet over the long years these things have lost their original function. The ghost stories people bandied about in the hill villages of the Edo Period meant something fundamentally different than today's urban myths. To the modern man, the supernatural is merely something he cannot understand. It'd be fine if people just left it at that, but no, they have to go misinterpreting everything, coming up with fantastical rationales in order to make sense of it all. And don't think you can just blame everything on the soul! I won't have anything to do with any foolishness that adds fuel to that particular fire."

"And yet you play shaman in your spare time. I hear you've made quite a business out of it, in fact."

For a side job, Kyogokudo worked as a faith healer: curing possessions, exorcising evil spirits, and so on. In a sense, it was a natural extension of his work as a priest, but what he did had little to do with Shinto. Rather, he practiced an unusual form of exorcism that he modified to fit the beliefs of the particular sect to which each customer belonged. He had developed a considerable reputation for it, though he rarely cared to discuss this unusual profession with me.

A moment passed as I awaited his response.

My friend said nothing, but his face betrayed more surprise than anger, and I could feel my curiosity rising. I had always wanted to question him in detail about his other work, so I resolved to take this opportunity to get the story out of him whether he wanted me to or not. If I could get him mad enough, maybe I could provoke him into actually telling me something.

"Don't try to hide it. Isn't it your job to wave a stick or whatnot when someone gets possessed by a fox, or a dead child comes back to haunt its mother? I hardly think you're in a position to make fun of people who carry on about ghosts."

There are those who merely dabble in withering looks, but Kyogokudo was a widely recognized master of the art. He favored me with one now.

"Sekiguchi, my friend, unlike the drivel you scrawl on a daily basis, religion is an essentially logical undertaking. People tend to focus on the eccentricities of it—the mysteries and the miracles—so much that we tend to think of all religion as being unpredictable, even threatening. The modern thinker, rational and logical to the bone, sees only the parts that fail to integrate well with the natural sciences, and wrinkles his nose at the whole affair. But it's a mistake to write off all the illogical aspects of religion as mere parable and allegory. If that's all they were, there are plenty of stories priests and clerics could use that are much easier to understand, and religion could do away with all that pious, made-up rubbish."

"So? What's your point? You haven't even answered my—"

"I'm getting there," Kyogokudo said, cutting me off. "You can call it a flight of fancy, dismiss it as a pack of lies, or you can call it morality or didactics, but none of this changes the fact that religion exists. In the end, you have those without faith calling the faithful idiots, while the faithful think those without are a bunch of losers. What I do is build a bridge between the two sides of this divide. Why is this necessary? I'll tell you. Anyone can cure a possession—but the religious don't think so. And the scientists think such questions aren't even meaningful. Each side closes its eyes to what it doesn't want to see, conveniently assuming it doesn't exist. Friction and misunderstandings all around."

"Well, that's awfully abstract... Let me get this straight. What you're saying is we should be able to scientifically analyze things that, until now, were deemed unscientific; that science can be used to cure possessions and rid people of curses? I hear all your little reasons, but it sounds to me like you're describing parapsychology—the very thing you were making fun of just a moment ago."

"Not at all! Science should be, by its very nature, universal. If you perform the same experiment under the same conditions, you have to get the same results. But the heart, the spirit, the soul—gods and buddhas!—don't work like that. Even if a man comes from the same sect of the same religion as you, his faith will be different than yours. It's just not something science is equipped to handle. How can we hope to understand what the heart is, or the soul, when we don't even truly understand the first thing about the physical workings of the brain? A man's spirit is the only thing about him science can't touch. That's why 'spiritual science' is a nonsensical term—it's an oxymoron."

"Then what about this bridge between science and religion you were proclaiming a moment ago?"

"It's just that, a bridge. I show the scientist a ghost in broad daylight, and I teach the religious man how to dispel his ghosts without uttering a single prayer. All such things amount to are just the human brain legitimizing itself anyway."

I didn't understand. "So you're saying that ghosts don't exist, is that it?"

"Oh, there are ghosts. You can see them, hear their voices, even touch them. But they don't *exist*. That's why science can't handle them—though it's a mistake to say they're figments of our imaginations merely because it can't. They *are* there, after all."

I could feel my confusion growing. Kyogokudo gave me the sort of look a parent might give to a hopeless child. With his fingertip he stroked the lid of the jar he was holding.

"You know, the articles you write have a negative effect on my profession. You go on about ghosts and haunts and make a big show of such things actually existing, writing about something that science can't possibly know as if it could—as if it does. Or at least, as if it will find out soon enough. Then the next day, I'll read some fantastic catalog of all the terrifying things in this world that science *can't* explain. You're having it both ways! And when you trot out your examples of something that science will never—can never—explain, you get the scientific apologists wound up denying your claims, saying it's unscientific. Pretty soon they've got the blinders on worse than any mystic ever had them, and there's a bunch of cranks running around like the court diviners of old, profiting off wards and charms that can't possibly work"—here a look of utter disgust spread across Kyogokudo's face—"and you end up with some freak show like parapsychology which, as a scientific discipline, makes about as much sense as a cat who lays eggs."

The comparisons my friend chose to employ in his tirades were always a little odd.

"Well, I won't claim I understand exactly what you're saying, but I get the general drift. So tell me this: in your theory of how the world works, where do my psychology and neurology fit in?" I pulled a cigarette out of my breast pocket, fished around for a match, and lit it. For a brief moment it sent up the sharp smell of burning phosphor; it's a smell I rather enjoy. "If science can't deal with the mind, are these disciplines all a sham too?"

Kyogokudo shook his head. "Everyone has a nervous system. When it needs fixing, you get a neurologist. It's no different than, say, curing hemorrhoids. The nerves are connected to the brain, and the brain is just an extension of the same system. Though we haven't made much progress there lately, soon we'll be able to fix that too—just like hemorrhoids."

"You seem fond of your hemorrhoids, but it pains me to tell you this. Actually they aren't all that easy to cure."

"Don't try to derail this conversation with your little jokes," the bookseller said with a chuckle. "Now where was I? Ah, right, psychology and neurology. They do just fine when they behave themselves. The problem comes when you start thinking of bodily organs like the brain and nervous system as being a man's mind or soul. That's the mistake Dr. Inoue and that crowd made

—blaming every problem under the sun on the nervous system, until they ended up having to explain away even the ghosts they loved so much as neurological phenomena. It's sad, really," he observed, without apparent sorrow.

"Maybe so, but people do see strange things when their nerves go haywire. I think Inoue Enryo was pretty advanced for a Meiji Period [1868-1912] philosopher, myself. Why be so hard on the guy?" I wanted to let my friend know that I was wise to his name dropping.

"I'm not being hard on him; rather, I'm saying he deserves our pity. And, as you say, the brain and nervous system *are* closely connected to the mind. Closely connected—but not the same thing."

Kyogokudo paused, a gleam of genuine happiness in his eyes. No one who was only casually acquainted with the man would ever have seen it. His disgruntled expression rarely changed; it had taken me long years of familiarity before I learned to perceive the slight differences that crept over his demeanor. Even now it was sometimes hard for me to spot the mirth behind his scowl, but there was one dead giveaway: when he was happy, he talked even more than usual.

"The mind and the brain go hand-in-hand, like *yakuza* and prostitution. If one of them goes bad, well then, you've got yourself a fight. However, if you can find a solution that satisfies both sides, most problems will die down. What's more, you can actually physically remedy the brain and nervous system side of the equation. But, as testament to its status as a non-organ, you can return a mind to its normal functioning state, and yet *still* have a problem. That's where religion is most effective. You might say religion is a scheme the brain came up with so it could have its way with the mind—a holy gambit, if you will."

"I'm not sure I follow that last bit. But I do appreciate that you think neurology has its uses." I was feeling some relief that not everything I believed in had been rejected outright. "So what about psychology?"

"Now *that* is like literature," my friend replied with a smile. "It's only effective on people who get it. Literature sprang from science's womb." Kyogokudo laughed out loud. "It's fun to compare psychology to anthropology. With psychology, you sample individual patients to derive a general theory for how things work, right? Anthropology, on the other hand, looks at a group unit, like a village, taking a shared sample to find its laws. In the end, however, both come back to the individual. That's where they become like literature. Take the revered Mr. Yanagita's folklore theses—they're about as literary as it gets! In fact, they're so filled with choice, crafted passages they hardly read like theses at all. And those Western psychology texts? You know what they should do with those? They should find some literary-minded fellow to translate them into Japanese and sell them as novels. Hey, sounds like a job for you!" Kyogokudo laughed even louder. It seemed my plan to anger him had backfired.

Then he lifted an eyebrow. "Wait a minute—Sekiguchi, weren't you a big fan of Dr. Sigmund back in the day?"

By that he meant Sigmund Freud, of course. I had been in the throes of depression when I first encountered the radical Austrian scholar, and for a time I had read his works feverishly. Hardly anyone had much to say about him back then, though lately I've heard his name mentioned more and more.

Kyogokudo had never shown a very high opinion of Freud back in our student days, however. Whether or not that had influenced me, my fancies had gradually shifted to Freud's pupil, Jung—and eventually, I had reached a point where I had little interest in the works of either.

"Well, for your sake, I'll admit that Dr. Sigmund was onto something when he came up with his whole theory of the unconscious mind," Kyogokudo muttered, half to himself.

I protested that I wasn't some sort of Freud devotee. "And what about this 'mind' you were just talking about? Is that different from what they call the conscious and the unconscious mind?"

"It's consciousness that's important. Without consciousness you couldn't read your trashy novels, view this jar, or see ghosts that don't exist."

"Now you're being vague again. So the mind and the brain are separate, and consciousness is yet another separate thing?"

"The world is divided into two."

"Come again?"

When Kyogokudo got going, he could ramble on with a passion—like a preacher from one of those new religions. I could recollect a few times when, in the middle of some extended lecture, he had run out of things to say. But it was an extremely rare event.

"To wit: there is a world inside us, and a world outside us. Everything in the world outside follows the physical laws of nature to the letter, while the world inside ignores them completely. To live successfully, humans have to bring the two worlds into step with each other. As long as we draw breath, our eyes and ears, hands and feet, and every other part of our body is accepting information from outside at a breakneck pace. It's the brain's job to step in and direct traffic. The brain orders this information, bundling it into easily digestible packets which it then presents to the mind.

"At the same time, all sorts of things are going on inside, and these need to be sorted out as well, but the inner world doesn't follow logical rules, which makes it rather hard to handle. Yet this too is laid on the brain's doorstep. The brain may not like it, but after all, it's the mind calling the shots, so the brain must listen. This exchange between mind and brain is what you call consciousness. The mind, firmly a creature of the inner world, swaps stories with the brain, and through consciousness connects to the world outside. From the other direction, events in the outside world filter in through the brain, forming

in the consciousness where they can be pulled into your inner world. In that sense, consciousness is sort of like Dejima* during *sakoku*, yes?"

"I'm not buying your last comparison there, but I get the picture. In fact, I was at a lecturer friend's house the other day with some psychology buffs, and they were arguing about whether consciousness was a function of the brain or the mind. But I like the sound of your theory best."

I realized that my cigarette had been sitting untended on the ashtray and was now almost completely turned to ash. I pulled another out of my pocket and lit it carefully.

"A theory—yes, I suppose it is," Kyogokudo said, following suit and lighting a cigarette of his own. He was either in a rare good mood today or he was just unusually at ease.

The moment was ripe for a little counter-attack.

"So, how does your theory interpret the subconscious, then?"

Kyogokudo answered almost before I'd finished asking the question. "The brain comes in layers, sort of like the layers of dough on a steamed bun," he explained. "The deeper you go, the earlier the layers were made. And the bean-jam at the center is the oldest. That's the animal brain—mostly in charge of instinct. People think we were born with instinct, but it makes more sense to think of instinct as knowledge we filched from our mother while still in the womb—learned memories, in other words. Fetuses have brains too, you know. They even dream. And from the parent's brain they get the minimum required amount of knowledge to live.

"Now, animals go through the rest of their lives with just this minimum amount of knowledge. But even their brains take in information from the outside and process it—they have the nerve, so to speak, to act just like humans in this regard. In other words, animals have a mind, or at least a self-awareness, that goes about its business, trading information with the brain. Not that different from us at all. What is different, however, is their lack of language. That's why their consciousness—the exchange between the brain and self-awareness—doesn't work as clearly as it does for we humans. Animals have no concept of time, past or future. For them there is only the now. A dubious proposition, to be sure. And yet, they manage to live quite handily regardless. And that animal under-brain still remains in humans, a little ball of bean-jam wrapped in dough."

"I get it. So now you're going to tell me that the interchange between this ancient brain and the mind is the subconscious? Something that's always there, even if we can't clearly recognize it."

"Thus do only animals ever know true happiness."

Kyogokudo let his gaze wander toward the veranda. There, the cat of the

*The peninsula in what is now Nagasaki Prefecture where trade was permitted with selected nations during Japan's *sakoku* period of isolation.

house was lying in the strong rays of the afternoon sun. It was fast asleep.

"Sleeps all the time, that one. You'd probably think that cat's a local, but you'd be wrong. That cat's from the continent, straight from Mt. Jinhua in China. I'd always heard that the cats of Jinhua could take human form so I went to the trouble of getting the thing and now all it does is sleep. Rather a disappointment, really."

If there was one thing my friend was unafraid of, it was bringing up entirely unrelated topics of conversation whenever he pleased. By and large, his little diversions had to be taken with a grain of salt. It was therefore impossible to tell how much of his story about the cat was true. For my part, I usually went along with his wild fabrications for the amusement they provided. "If you wanted a magical cat, you should've gotten one from Nabeshima," I offered."

Kyogokudo chuckled and admitted I was probably right.

It was then that I finally realized what the bookseller was up to.

All this theorizing had been his way of avoiding talking about his side job. He had picked up on my hinting quicker than I expected and gradually nudged the point of the conversation in another direction.

And I hadn't noticed it. I'd allowed myself to be carried along with the flow, which was why my friend's mood had been growing brighter and brighter. As a result, I hadn't learned the first thing about Kyogokudo's work as a faith healer, which had been my entire purpose. Resolved not to walk away empty-handed, I forced the conversation back on track.

"So, Kyogokudo," I began, "I think I've grasped as much of your theory as I'm going to—with that in mind, what about your work?"

"What about my work? What do you mean?"

"Weren't we talking about your side job as a faith healer?"

"Whatever gave you that idea? I believe this started with you bringing me that story about the pregnant woman."

This was true. Kyogokudo shot me a look of perplexed bemusement. I must have looked like a real idiot, sitting there, puffing on my cigarette, groping for a way to change the topic. "Right, well, what about these ghosts of yours—how is it that they *are*, and yet don't exist—care to explain that so I can understand it?"

It was usually at about this point in a typical conversation that my questions suddenly became suspect, as if I carried some hidden agenda on my back that I hadn't revealed, which, in fact, I was. My friend watched me falter and his mood grew even brighter, though his sour expression remained unchanged as always. "What, have you not understood a word I've said?" he asked with evident disappointment.

"No, I followed your theory about the brain, the mind, and consciousness

just fine."

"Then you understand that everything you're seeing, everything you're hearing, everything you touch and taste—they're all goods your brain delivers wholesale to you, its only customer."

"Right, I got that."

"So tell me then, how do you check the quality of the goods your brain sells you? For example, how do you know that I am the proprietor of the Kyogokudo bookshop?"

"I know that because I know it."

"Which is nonsense, but I'll interpret what you said to mean that you check quality by crosschecking what you take in with your memory."

"Sure, my memories and experiences and the like."

"Experience is just a subsection of memory. So basically, if you lost your memory you wouldn't know what anything is—nothing at all. If you forgot how to walk you couldn't move your legs, hmm?"

"I suppose—"

I suppose he's right.

"However," Kyogokudo continued, "current medical science hasn't given us a clear answer as to where, or how, these memories are stored." From his tone, he was taking on the role of provocateur.

"Wait—that's not true!" I protested. It *wasn't*, at least as far as I understood the current state of things to be. "Memories *are* stored in the brain." *They have to be.* "Don't they call the brain the 'storehouse of memory' or some such?"

Kyogokudo scratched his jaw. "I wouldn't be so sure. What we do know quite well is that the brain acts as a gatekeeper. All the information taken in by the eyes and ears has to first pass customs inspection in the brain. And here's the rub: the brain only lets in things it understands. And every little thing has to pass inspection before it's even allowed into the consciousness."

"What about stuff that doesn't make it through?"

"Sent off to memory's storehouse without ever visiting the consciousness. Now, just what authority do you think the brain defers to when it performs its inspections? Memory. The brain trots down through the stacks, pulls out memories as it sees fit, and compares them to the new information coming in. If the new stuff passes inspection, it gets thrown in with the old down in the storehouse again."

"Hey, that's not a bad metaphor. I actually understood that one."

"But get this. What do you think happens when our perfect customs inspector is dishonest, and smuggles in something that doesn't fit? Do you think the customer—your mind—sitting up there watching life play out on consciousness's stage would know it for a fake?"

"No, probably not. But why would the brain be dishonest in the first place? I don't see the benefit."

*The reference is to "The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima," a ghost story.

Kyogokudo was adamant that there really was a reason.

"I don't see it," I said, shaking my head. "What's there to gain?"

"Not something to gain, just less to lose. Call it managing an awkward situation. Let's say, for instance, that the brain trotted down to the storehouse yet couldn't find an appropriate sample to use to reference the new information. That would make inspection difficult. Slight discrepancies can be glossed over, but sometimes what comes in just doesn't mesh in some fundamental way with what's already there. This raises a question of trust. The mind trusts the brain implicitly, absolutely. As I said before, if memory's storehouse were emptied, and the brain could no longer trust its resources, why, you wouldn't live longer than a minute. This trust is the one thing that cannot—must not—be betrayed. The customer would rather swallow a palatable lie than lose faith in the system.

"One other thing: sometimes the customer doesn't *like* the goods he's received—he wants something *else*. And, as you know, the customer is always right. At times like these, the brain shuffles down to the storehouse, pulls out a suitable product, and then with a bit of prestidigitation, uses it to replace whatever just came in. The customer has no way of knowing the goods aren't fresh. But then, of course, somewhere down the line, you get contradictions. Customs is not passing along the goods it actually received, after all. It messes up the account books."

"What do you mean the customer—the mind—wants something else? What kind of something else?"

"Let's say, for instance, that you want to see someone who happens to be dead..."

"Oh." I finally understood. "So that's what a ghost is?"

"That's not the only sort, but by and large, yes. Now, as far as our subject's mind is concerned—that is to say, his inner world—what he sees and what is real are absolutely indistinguishable. You might call it illusory reality. Of course, for the person in question, it *is* reality. Reality, after all, gets vetted by the same customs official in the brain. None of us, myself included, can see or hear the world as it really is. We are beholden to what our brains deem suitable for us to receive—a biased trickle of sensory information."

"But wouldn't it cause too much confusion if there were all these things around that shouldn't be around? And is it really so easy to see or hear these illusory realities you're claiming we produce? Surely the mind can't just wish for something and make it so. I certainly never had the pleasure."

"You don't *want* to see something and then see it; because, at the moment you think you want to see something, it's entered your consciousness, and your brain knows about it. Once your brain knows what's going on, it naturally selects the path of least resistance—which is to say, it can run down to the storehouse and pull out a memory that proves what you want to see doesn't

exist. The would-be wished-for thing is then discarded or ignored. No need for lies, that way."

"So you have to want something unconsciously to see it?"

"Indeed. Then, once the brain has told its lies, it has no choice but to go back and start cooking the books to 'prove' nothing is amiss. Its pride wouldn't stand for it. You see, the brain lives in the world of the natural sciences. Which is why it needs excuses, like 'unexplained phenomena,' and the self-justification religion provides."

I nodded. "I see. Something still doesn't seem entirely right, but I get your drift. You're saying that religion is like a mediator between the brain and the mind, making sure both sides stay happy."

"And you thought I was the only one with clever metaphors. Yes, it's true, the brain makes mistakes and oversights. That's when a mediator works best. Left to its own devices, you see, the brain would just administer pharmaceuticals—which was fine when we were animals, but stopped working so well somewhere along the line."

"Huh? Pharmaceuticals?"

"Drugs. When you feel pleasant, or happy, that's the drugs in your brain talking. Think of the basic actions we perform to survive: eating, exercise, sex—most of them involve pleasure of some sort. The mind yearns for that triggered pleasure, needs it like an addict needs his fix. An animal can feel euphoric just by living. But when you start having a society, and words, the brain's supply of drugs doesn't cut it anymore; there's too much complexity, and man loses his happiness. That's where the unexplained and the mysterious start looming large. So man searched for happiness to replace what he'd lost, and religion was born. It's a substitute drug, if you will. Opium, morphine—those are substitutes of substitutes. That communist who said 'religion is the opiate of the masses' was on to something..."

Kyogokudo seemed to have come to the end of his lecture, leaving me slightly agitated. It was a feeling I couldn't place, as if a sturdy vessel on which I had long been floating had suddenly begun to disintegrate beneath me, like the badger's wattle boat in the folktale."

It was then that the bookseller, peering at me in my confusion, suddenly asked, "So, how's your great-grandfather doing?"

"What are you talking about?" I stammered. "That's an odd way to try and change the subject."

"Who said I was changing the subject? Well? Your father's father's father—how is he?"

**Kachikachiyama*, the story of a *tanuki* who kills a fisherman's wife. The death is avenged by a rabbit who tricks the creature into a boat race, but gives it a boat made of mud which quickly sinks.

I felt compelled to answer, though I had absolutely no inkling of where he was going with this. "I never even met the man. You know that. Even my father's father passed away when I was five. My great-grandfather joined the ranks of the dead long before I was born."

"So, you don't know if he really existed or not."

"Of course he existed. I'm here, after all, and I'm his descendant."

"Whatever. So what about your grandfather? Did he exist?"

"Didn't I just tell you he passed away when I was five? I might be stupid, but I remember that. He existed, all right?"

"But what if you were merely born with that memory? Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you were born only a short while ago, just before you arrived here. You popped into this world with all these prior memories to make you *believe* you existed before now. You, sitting right here, would have no way of knowing the truth. Am I wrong?"

With that, Kyogokudo fell silent.

Ding... A wind chime tinkled in the evening air.

The sun that had been shining on the veranda had long since dimmed, and the air outside was hazy with fog. The cat that a moment before had been sleeping just there was now nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, I felt afraid—like an infant set adrift at sea. No, the feeling was closer to loneliness, and something more rare—ephemerality? My wattle dinghy had melted into the vastness of the ocean.

"That can't be—that's ridiculous. I'm me."

"How do you know? I'd say you were unfit to make such judgments. Your memories, your *now*—couldn't they all have been made up by your brain a few moments ago? Like a script dashed off by a playwright just before the curtains open. The audience hasn't a clue that it was finished only moments before. They can't tell the difference."

"No," I mumbled. "I'm more than that, more permanent... I'm..."

The confines of the back room suddenly seemed dark to my eyes.

"By yourself, you can't tell the difference between reality and an imaginary construct you may *call* reality. Sekiguchi—I name you that, but there is no guarantee that's who you are. The chances that you and all the world around you are just a phantasm and the chances it's all real are exactly equal."

But then...

"So what does that make me? Am I the ghost?!"

A fierce sense of unease assaulted me, as though the entire world I thought I knew had abandoned me. Even the loneliness I had felt during my depres-

sion seemed a far more hopeful thing than this. I worried that soon, I wouldn't be able to tell if I was really sitting there, looking at my friend, or not—every hint experience gave me was fading into doubt.

Minutes passed.

Suddenly, the man sitting before me broke out in peals of laughter, jolting me back to my senses.

"Ah ha ha ha! Hey, you, Sekiguchi—it's okay, really. You're fine. I had no idea it would work so well. Please, forgive me."

Still I sat there for a while, trying my utmost to reassure myself that the joyous looking fellow before me truly was Kyogokudo.

"My friend, Sekiguchi, it's all right. You're you, Tatsumi Sekiguchi, and none other. I guarantee it." Kyogokudo clutched his sides, he was laughing so hard.

Gradually I began to grasp the situation, and at the same time I could feel the anger swelling within me. "What's going on here?" I fumed. "Did you cast a spell on me? Was that some technique of yours?"

"Now that would be a nifty trick. But I'm no magician—or ninja for that matter. You said you wanted to know about my work, so I showed you. I had no idea it would be so effective."

Kyogokudo apologized profusely.

My friend had seen right through me from the start. I felt like the Monkey King in *Journey to the West*, strutting about while the whole time never realizing he was standing on the Buddha's palm.

"So, everything you've said... You made all that up to trick me?"

"No, it's not like that. It was all true. Too true, some of it." Kyogokudo removed a hand from his pocket and scratched his jaw. It was a gesture he often made when he was troubled about something.

"Then explain it to me. I feel like I've been bewitched by a fox or something—like in the stories."

"Your family belongs to the Nichiren sect of Buddhism, correct?"

"Yeah? So? This better not be another of your tricks."

"No tricks, no spells. What I'm getting at is that you were converted, you joined a religion, and yet you have no faith."

"Not so fast. I've got a sutra hanging on the altar at home."

"And I'll bet you fail to dust it off even once a month. No, you are no man of faith. You are not a scientist either, for that matter."

I frowned. "I guess that's fair."

"So, for people like you, telling the truth works best."

"That's right—you modify your techniques to suit the beliefs of your patient, don't you." Once I remembered that, I felt I understood what had happened—our conversation had been an exorcism of sorts. Yet I couldn't help

suspecting that there was still a trap lying in wait for me somewhere, and it made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to feel that terrible sense of doubt ever again. Perhaps carelessly, I let my wariness show.

"Now, now, don't frown like that. As you say, my exorcisms only work when I understand my patients' environment and their character. The method I chose just now worked well for you because I spoke to you in the terms you were best able to understand. For someone else I might have used sutras, or prayer, or even science. All that's required is to temporarily scrap the lines of communication between brain and mind. Then, once they're properly re-linked, most problems tend to sort themselves out."

"Sutras and prayer I get, but why science?"

"A man of science thinks scientifically, but when it comes to the relationship of mind to brain, he merely *believes* in the science of it. Nowadays science is being used as a substitute for religion in many ways. And yet for most people, it's a whole lot more trouble than simply relying on religious faith. After all, nothing is more ill-suited to explaining the supernatural than science. It's like using a ruler to measure a dream—it can't be done. End result: the brain loses confidence."

"Well, I think my brain just lost its confidence. Because, for a moment there, it gave my mind reason to lose faith in what it was being told. You're wretched, you know that?"

"And yet the scope of your awareness has widened considerably. You should thank me."

"Oh? So what, my brain can't trick me anymore?"

"Alas, such is not the case. As long as you draw breath, you will be duped by your gray matter. But now at least you'll have the presence of mind to cast doubt on what it's telling you sometimes."

"That's all? Some remedy," I grumbled.

"Well, you were sane enough to begin with. How can I fix that which isn't broken?" Kyogokudo laughed aloud again. Then, a serious look returned to his face. "By the way, about your great-grandfather—"

"No way. I'm not falling for that one again."

"Just listen. Now, you have absolutely no first-hand knowledge of your father's father's father, right?"

"Of course not. But he isn't just something my brain made up. I'm living physical proof that he's not." I must have shot my friend a look that said I was tired of him and his manipulations.

"Now, now, don't go jumping to conclusions. I'm sure your great-grandfather existed, no one doubts that fact. Tell me, what was his name?"

"What's this obsession with my great-grandfather? I think his name was Hanjiro—something like that. He was a boat-lender at some harbor, a real big shot it sounds like. Unfortunately, my grandfather thought so too. He believed

in his father so much that he staked the family's fortunes on the business until he washed up on dry land without two coins to rub together. That's why *my* father, as you know, is a poor teacher out in the countryside."

"That's it!" Kyogokudo slapped the edge of the table with his hand.

"That's what?"

"How do you know all this? You weren't alive for most of it. How could such information possibly come to you?"

"Okay, now that's just stupid. I mean, isn't it obvious? I heard about it from people who *were* alive then. My great-grandfather's name is on the death register they keep in a temple in our hometown, too. I'm pretty sure our family records burned up in the war, but I know there is a photo or two left of him back home."

"Exactly, that's it." This time, Kyogokudo excitedly slapped his knee. "How do you learn new things about the world outside of what you experience directly? Through words, and records. That's how the information gets to you."

"Sure."

"All right, now listen to this. Since you are sitting here before me as living proof, we have to accept that your great-grandfather existed—but what about Tokugawa Ieyasu? Do you believe *he* existed?"

Kyogokudo leaned forward. I drew back.

"Of course. You say the strangest things sometimes. First of all, isn't this city—Tokyo—proof that he did? Edo never would have been built if it weren't for Ieyasu. I'll bet you're the only person in Japan that doubts his existence."

"Oh? What makes you so confident?"

"What makes you so skeptical? Ieyasu has descendants, too, you know. They're living proof, just like me."

"Ah yes, but in your case we're only going back three generations or so—there might still be someone alive who knew Hanjiro personally. But in Ieyasu's case we have to go back maybe fifteen generations, right? Nobody around today knew Ieyasu when he was alive. Not even his descendants could confirm his existence that way."

"What about all the records? Ieyasu's a hundred times better documented than my great-grandfather. There are records of him all over the place. Public records, what's more. I mean, I don't even know how my great-grandfather died, but I know how Ieyasu did."

"Red snapper *tempura*? Okay, but why do you think that information is trustworthy? There are certainly many theories about how he died. You won't find the death-by-*tempura*-food-poisoning story in any textbook."

"Maybe not, but why doubt the most commonly accepted theory? Anyhow it's a big leap to go from recognizing that there are alternate ideas about how he died all the way to questioning his very existence."

Kyogokudo chuckled.

"Stop that. It's creepy."

He stopped, then spoke again, a mischievous glint in his eye. "So, Sekiguchi, you acknowledge Daidaraboshi's existence, too?"

"You know, I think you've finally taken leave of your senses. Daidaraboshi is a giant from a folktale! Of course he didn't exist."

"Why's that? His situation isn't all that different from that of Ieyasu."

"What do you mean? It's completely different. One is a historical figure; the other is a monster from some fairy tale."

"But there are records of both. And both stories are too old to be confirmed directly. Furthermore, the story of Daidaraboshi *isn't* just some old fairy tale, it's a widely recorded legend. It doesn't begin with 'a long time ago in a place far, far way,' you know."

"It doesn't?"

"It doesn't. It begins with something along the lines of 'in the county of Naka in the province of Hitachi'—you see? The setting is very specific, and the place is real. Go there, and you'll even find ruins dating back to the era the legend describes. Of course, this particular story isn't told about that place only—each region has its own version. But none of them contradict the others. It's a whole lot more believable than someone dying several ways."

Kyogokudo was laying a trap for me again. Either that, or he was leading up to some stupid punchline. I couldn't tell which.

"If you believe that Tokugawa Ieyasu existed based on the strength of written records, then by the same token, you must also believe that Daidaraboshi existed. And not just Daidaraboshi—" Kyogokudo scooped up a pair of clothbound books off the *tatami* and slapped them on the table. He opened the top one and turned to a page at random. "The creatures in here, there are records of them too. As many as there are of Ieyasu—"

The books he showed me were, like the copy of *An Assortment of One Hundred Jar-Ghosts* he had been reading when I arrived at the shop, Edo-period recreational books by the artist Toriyama Sekien. Their titles read: *A Night Procession of One Hundred Ghosts* and *One Hundred More Ghosts of Past and Present*. They were part of what would nowadays be called a series, which collected all the stories popular at the time of ghosts, transforming foxes and *tanuki*, and evil spirits running amok—a sort of who's who of the supernatural world. There had been twelve volumes published in all, so they must have been quite popular. However, for all that, the illustrations were quite understated—nothing like the downright frightening work of later artists such as Yoshitoshi or Okyo.*

"If you ask me, that's a bizarre conclusion to come to. Just writing something doesn't make it true, after all."

*Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892); Maruyama Okyo (1733-1795).

"Yes, but it *was* written down—that's my point." Kyogokudo looked at me with the mischievous eyes of a child who has just played a prank. "No direct contact with the subject itself, and knowledge through written records—on these two points, there is no appreciable difference between your great-grandfather, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and the likes of Daidaraboshi. Because the conditions are similar for all three, it falls to you to determine which you believe in and which you do not. So, you choose to accept the existence of the former two, but not the latter."

"Right. Because I have plenty of supporting evidence to help me make that decision."

"Do you?" he asked, cutting me off with a malicious grin. "What if I told you it's not a question of evidence? You're merely lacking the logical tools you need to read the truth in the latter record, that's all."

"What, so I believe in Tokugawa Ieyasu and not in the fairy-tale—excuse me—*legendary* giant; not because of some basis in fact, but because I have a narrow world view, is that it?"

"No, you have sufficient knowledge of the way the world works, and your own personal policies and predilections, I'm sure. Furthermore, I'm sure your views all agree with the norms of today's society and that's really none of my concern. But what we must be aware of is that in no age, under no circumstances, is a man's knowledge absolute."

"That's probably true—to a point. I mean, no matter when we're talking about, impossible things are still impossible, right?"

Things that aren't, aren't.

"Sekiguchi... I just gave you a creditable theory to explain the appearance of ghosts, yes? Could someone not, by the same process, also see a giant? If *you* saw a giant, I've no doubt you would trust your eyes. After all, you've experienced first-hand the fact that an observer cannot determine if what he sees is real or imagined."

"Well..." *Maybe so, but still...* "Okay, for the sake of argument, let's say that I actually witness this Daidaraboshi. Being gullible, I believe it's real, just as I believe in everything else I've ever seen. But if I told anyone else about it, they would think I was handing them a pack of lies. No one would believe me, right?"

"Quite." Kyogokudo grinned. "Why would they, if only you saw it? But the circumstances are changed altogether once your experience is turned into words. Words—or pictures, for that matter—are an abstraction that can make an experience universally accessible. Once your story is codified by being written down, anyone can read it and understand it."

"I see. So they would *understand* it better. But that still doesn't mean they'd think it was anything more than a raving delusion on my part," I said with all the haughtiness I could muster. I felt my mouth twist downward in a stubborn scowl.

"Yes, it's just as you say. Your experience, your monster, is entirely yours, and if no one else should happen to see it as you do, it's called a delusion. But supposing there was someone who did believe it? Now you are sharing your illusory reality—creating a collective delusion, if you will. Now, from all the records and legends left to us we can safely say that it wasn't just one or two people who shared the particular collective delusion of Daidaraboshi. The same goes for these grotesques, here."

Kyogokudo absentmindedly flipped through the pages of *A Night Procession of One Hundred Ghosts*. "There's a reason why these creatures took form, why they remain with us today. If, as you suggested, we are to take commonly accepted wisdom at face value, then we must recognize that monsters have been around as long as there have been people to talk about them. Yet the modern man, and I'm including you here, has no place for monsters in his modern world. He may look at the records, and though he understands what is written, he does not perceive their *meaning*. Tokugawa Ieyasu, on the other hand... He fits in with your view of the world, and thus are you able to comprehend him with some degree of accuracy. This comprehension breeds trust. This is the vaunted process by which we determine what is and what isn't reliable. It's nothing more than that."

"So you're saying there's no absolute objectivity or truth to historical records—that the truth of what we read is all relative? Everything is relative? That's what you're saying."

When does it stop?

How many of my beliefs must he strip from me before he's satisfied?

"Exactly. And believe me, to the people living in mountain villages during the Edo Period, with absolutely no education in history to speak of, a marauding mountain hag would have been far more real than Ieyasu ever was. I'm sure if you walked up to them and asked what they thought of Ieyasu, they'd have told you 'no one by that name lives 'round these parts,' and gone about their business."

Of course he was right. I had nothing to say to that. As I sat there, stewing, I realized that it wasn't being out-foxed and out-argued that bothered me. It was that, despite myself, I was still paying attention to the man.

"Words are tricksters at heart," the bookseller continued. "They'll as soon spread a collective delusion as they'll inform you about a warlord in Edo. But let's be specific: I say 'collective' delusion, but while it is *shared*, it is by no means uniform. That's the fascinating part. Illusory reality is an entirely individual thing. It can never truly be duplicated in another."

"But that contradicts what you were saying before. If you can't share a collective delusion, then it's just one man's imagined reality—in other words, a delusion."

"Like I said, fascinating! Religion is subject to the same conditions. Do

you know what you call a religious figure without a single follower? Insane. You can't have a religion without believers. Only when the delusion becomes systematized can it become collective. And yet, even people from the same religious sect will not experience a perfectly identical illusory reality. This is where we see the genius of religion. Even though its adherents may have separate, individual experiences, religion tells them it's all the same. Thus you can use the same pretext to quell the tensions between the brains and minds of a lot of different people at the same time. *You can 'save' them*. And how does it all work? With words."

"In the beginning there was the word, you mean?"

"Good one!"

My off-the-cuff remarks were the only ones that ever rated my friend's praise.

"That's the meat of it. The historical man Tokugawa Ieyasu does not equal the Ieyasu you believe in. What binds them together are the records—in other words: words." Kyogokudo coughed to clear his throat. "In the end, the brain is just another organ. In the beginning, as long as *your* brain could convince *your* mind it knew what it was talking about, there wasn't a problem. But, by the power of words, memory began to walk all on its own. Words didn't just awaken the consciousness, they wandered into the world outside and created the monster we know as shared awareness. Once an experience is converted into words, it no longer belongs to the individual who originated it. It's already a collective delusion! As you know, individual understanding—being able to tell whether something is imagined or real—is impossible, even for the person experiencing things first-hand. What, then, about words that have escaped out into the world? We might think they can be trusted, having been vetted by so many brains, but that's not the case. When something is transformed into the shared abstraction that is language, it floats around until someone else takes it in—where it again transforms back into something specific, and apparently *concrete*. But again, it's impossible for an individual to determine whether this second transformation was performed with any accuracy or not."

"I get it!"

For once, I actually understood where Kyogokudo was going with something before he'd finished saying it.

"You're talking about how a single word can convey so much, and how the connotations change. Like, for instance, when I talk about you with other people, it would take me a whole lot of words to describe you if I couldn't just say 'the proprietor of Kyogokudo Books.' But if they know you at all, all I need to say is 'Kyogokudo' and they'll know precisely what I'm talking about. With that one word, they can draw a picture of you in their heads. But the Kyogokudo *I* might draw and the 'Kyogokudo' they're thinking of are actually slightly—no, in some cases, they might be radically—different. Yet, because

we share this concept of 'Kyogokudo,' we can hold a conversation, and since we don't know what's really going on in each other's heads, we complacently assume that we're thinking of pretty much the same thing."

"See?" My friend smiled. "The remedy did work after all. It's just as you say. Words are the most basic form of spells. As you are enchanted by a spell called 'Tatsumi Sekiguchi,' so am I enchanted by the spell 'Kyogokudo.' We use them all the time without thinking. Tokugawa Ieyasu did exist, but *what we know for a fact* is that there are records of a person by that name who lived a long time ago. We certainly don't know the man himself. It reminds me of the Zen precept of 'no dependence on words and letters.' Even if Ieyasu's existence is a fact, for us, 'Ieyasu' isn't real. Yet, sometimes, we might feel that we do know Ieyasu—we experience a sort of hallucination. This glitch in the mind's program occurs because the memory storehouse that holds the information evoked by the word 'Ieyasu' is the same storehouse that holds memories of our own personal experiences. Information received from words, and information we gained from experience: both become memories, and the memories blend together. Which is why we might one day potentially see the ghost of the God-Who-Shines-in-the-East—Ieyasu himself!"

"Ah, now we're back where we started. So, you're saying that with all the stuff that the brain shoves at us in hopes it will all make sense, we get these little inconsistencies—cracks in reality—sneaking in, is that it?"

"I see you've lost quite a lot of stock in the brain," my friend observed. "Ah well, can't be helped, I suppose. Anyway, yes, we get whatever the brain gives us. As far as that goes, Daidaraboshi is quite the same as our Ieyasu. If you should happen to need him, he'll show up, as real as you or me." Kyogokudo gleefully rubbed the little jar, now resting on his knee, that he had been toying with off and on over the course of our conversation.

I felt myself relax, too, if only slightly. "No, it'll be a long while before I need to see anyone sitting on top of Mount Fuji lean down to wash his hands in Lake Biwa. My healthy respect for biology would just get in the way of the scene. You see, I'm one of those *scientific* literary types."

At last I felt myself coming back to my own territory. I even ventured a smile.

"Hah! If that's the case, then it'd do you good to hallucinate every now and again. You say you're a man of letters, but all I see is a man with a chronic lack of imagination. Aren't words the bread and butter of the writer's trade, anyway?"

"Does the denigration never cease with you? My imagination is like unto a veritable wellspring!"

"Well then, *sensei*, would you happen to know how many *busshari* there are in the world?"

Now this had to be a joke. *Sensei* was a common enough term of respect

for a man of letters, but Kyogokudo never deigned to call me that unless his intention was to make a fool of me.

"By *busshari* you mean *the busshari*? The bones of the Buddha? Well, there are stupas said to house the bones all over the country—probably not just in Japan, either. I guess I'd have to say I have no idea."

"Well, I have it on good authority that if you were to gather all the bone fragments from all the pagodas across Japan, the weight of the collected bones would be about the same as that of an elephant skeleton. What do you think of that, *sensei*?"

"What do I think? I think it sounds ridiculous. Either the temples responsible wanted to assert their authenticity so badly they felt it necessary to lie, or someone's been slipping in extra bones on the sly—"

Kyogokudo cut me off, shaking his head. "Just like I said, no imagination. Why not think 'my, the Buddha was such a large man'?" He laughed. My friend was obviously enjoying himself very much. And I, the butt of his joke again, was more the fool for letting it happen. But I joined in the laugh when I allowed myself for a moment to imagine the Buddha, large as an elephant, teaching his disciples who sat like tiny ants at his feet.

"By the way, what is that jar you've been fondling for the past hour?" I demanded after a moment. It had been bothering me for some time now.

"Oh, this? It's a bone-jar. The bones of the Buddha are inside."

"Liar. Why would you be walking around with a bone from the Buddha? You run a bookstore, and when you're not doing that you're a Shinto priest, not a Buddhist monk."

"But it's true."

Kyogokudo opened the lid of the jar and withdrew a small white chunk. "Care for some?" he popped the fragment into his mouth.

"You are insane!" I shouted.

"And you are quite gullible. You should pay more attention to things. Look, it's dry candy from the Kangetsu-an sweet shop."

"That's it," I said. "You are the biggest fraud I've ever known. I'm done believing a word you say. You're worse than the brain selling lies to the mind. Why keep sweets in a jar like that, anyway?"

"My wife doesn't like it much either, but these days if you leave them out the moisture does them in quicker than I can eat them. So I found this jar—it's perfect!" Kyogokudo picked out another piece and noisily chewed it. "But consider this. Until I opened the lid, there could've been bones inside this jar, not candy."

"Okay, where are you going with this one? You're going to have to try real hard to surprise me this time." At this point I felt ready for practically anything he could throw at me.

"Well—I was just thinking how we've been talking about the brain and

the mind and the world inside us, which can sometimes get confusing, so maybe it's time to talk about the physical world. Do you know anything about the study of quantum mechanics?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but no. You're talking about Dr. Yukawa's thesis? The one that won the Nobel prize—what was that, last year? Two years ago?"

Kyogokudo shook his head and explained that no, Yukawa's thesis had been about mesons.

"Quantum mechanics first showed up in the discourse about twenty or thirty years ago. It's a theory of atomic structure and how atomic forces work."

"And this has something to do with what was in your jar?"

"Everything to do with it, yes. Because quantum mechanics first introduced a particularly troubling law of physics called the uncertainty principle."

"And uncertainty here means something you can't be certain about?" I asked smugly.

"Exactly," he replied without batting an eye. "The upshot of it is that when you try to measure the activity of an atom its position changes, and when you try to measure its position, its level of activity changes."

"Can't you just measure both at once?"

"Unfortunately, no. If the position of the atom is determined, its level of activity is limitlessly indeterminate. And when its level of activity is determined, you can't figure out where it is anymore. The most important thing is this: until you measure an atom and decide anything about it, it doesn't really exist at all in the predictable, stationary manner of larger physical objects. To put it another way, the very instant an observer measures an atom is the instant that atom first takes on a measurable form and character, and until that point the atom can only be understood in terms of possibilities. A very shocking idea to come out of the natural sciences, certainly. In view of this idea, we might say that it was only when I first opened the lid of this jar that its contents settled down and became dried sweets."

"Are you sure it was a scientist who came up with that theory? If it's true, doesn't it make our daily lives seem awfully unstable? How are we supposed to know what's going on anywhere when we're not looking? It's like the world is made of gelatin."

Kyogokudo chuckled. "There were many who disagreed, to be sure, but none with an argument persuasive enough to refute it. I hear even Einstein would have nothing to do with it. But, if you ask me, I think the theory will develop into a very important field."

"Well, if Einstein was against it, it's probably wrong. That's a relief. If we can't trust our brains, and we can't trust the rule of natural science in the

world, what *can* we trust?"

"Note that Einstein never denied it—just said he'd have nothing to do with it. I think it went against his aesthetics. In any case, quantum mechanics creates a situation where, for the first time since Descartes, we cannot be certain that observer and observed can truly be separated. Why? Because *the very act of observing affects the subject*—which, in a certain light, makes a great deal of sense. The best observation results are obtained when a subject isn't aware of being observed, after all. And so we see the hypothesis that quantum mechanics presents to us: namely, that this world, including the past, is retroactively created the moment we look at it."

"Whoa there. That's science? I don't think so." For a moment I felt as if somehow we were repeating our earlier conversation. Were we not, in fact, having a discussion about awareness and religion, disguised in scientific garb?

But Kyogokudo insisted it was science. "Just take a look at the universe that we know through scientific inquiry," he demanded. "It seems awfully well suited to our survival. If the Earth were just a tad closer to the Sun we would all be burnt to crisps. If the Moon were a little closer, it would slam into the Earth, and if it were a little farther away it would fly off into outer space. It all seems a little too convenient."

"Yeah, but it's the truth."

"Only when we *observe* it does it become true."

"Sure, whatever."

"When we ask *why* our world seems so well constructed to suit our needs, there can be only one reason: it is because we are the ones observing it. If not a single human being walked upon this earth, it wouldn't matter how long the planet was going to last, or how far it is from the sun. These questions would remain unknown for an eternity, and there would be no one to care. The magic of words may have awakened our inner worlds, but it was the magic of science that awakened the world outside us. A world without humans would be a very vague, indeterminate place indeed. Which, ironically enough, science is now beginning to prove it is anyway." Kyogokudo stretched, and gave a languid sigh.

"Quantum mechanics," he went on after a moment, "leads us to a fork in the theoretical road: we can either see humans as a part of our universe, or the universe as a part of us. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if, at a very, very small scale, the boundary between inner worlds and outer worlds isn't a bit vague."

So saying, he closed the jar with a *clunk*.

I imagined the dry sweets inside transforming into fragments of white bone.

"So this quantum mechanics," I ventured, "doesn't it sort of go beyond

the bounds of science?"

"Don't be foolish," my friend admonished me. "If it went beyond any bounds, its scientific status would crumble, and it wouldn't *be* science anymore. You can't have science if you don't trust either the observer or the subject of observation, after all."

Ding... The wind chime sounded again.

As the day waned, my unease was growing deeper and deeper.

The overblown, lowbrow stories I was in the habit of writing, about karmic debt inherited from parents, or heaven's punishment for evil deeds done, had always felt safe to me simply because they weren't true. That was the basic assumption that allowed them to work for me as stories. But now it seemed like the worldview and the values I'd held for as long as I could remember were all about as firm as melting caramel. I couldn't write such decrepit nonsense anymore—or at least, I had no desire to do so.

Yet while I sat there, feeling mortified about the whole afternoon, my friend—the one who'd put me in this state in the first place—seemed to be having the time of his life. The day's revelations were nothing much to him, after all; he'd been aware of them from the start.

"Well, would you look at the time! You must be hungry. I think I'll close up shop and head over to the takeaway place down the road. You can have the *tanuki* soba; I'll have the *kitsune* udon."

Without bothering to ask my opinion, Kyogokudo decided our menu and rushed off to the restaurant to order. He always chose what I was going to eat for me after our little talks—which was, perhaps, for the best. Where I could hem and haw over a menu for hours, my friend was very decisive. I didn't think it a coincidence, though, that on this occasion he'd chosen dishes named after the *tanuki* and the fox—both animals known to possess hapless humans.

In fairy tales, at least.

I was alone.

I noticed, suddenly, that the light was on in the room where I sat, though I had no idea when it had been turned on, or by whom. The *tsugaru* lacquerware table with its colorful whorls was littered with the detritus of the day: an ashtray holding several crumpled butts, a white bone-jar with quantum candy inside, and a couple catalogs of ghosts and demons, the veracity of which I had been proven unqualified to judge.

My mug of weak tea was now completely dry.

I felt a savage thirst coming on, and so I stood up to help myself to some more tea. There was a tray and an empty teapot next to the cushion where Kyogokudo had been sitting, but the critical elements of a tea can and hot

water were nowhere to be found.

As I looked around, my gaze happened to fall upon the book that lay open on the table.

There was an illustration on the page—a painting of a woman.

Her breasts were exposed, and the lower half of her body was covered in something bright red like blood.

She was holding a child, also drenched in blood.

Around her was wilderness—a moor of some kind.

The woman held one hand to her forehead; the other was almost casually wrapped around the infant. She looked as if she was getting ready to hand the baby over to someone.

Me?

Her expression was dark. But it wasn't bitter, or sad, or hateful.

She just looked...distracted.

If she had appeared hateful, it probably would have been much more frightening. But her distracted expression made it something else.

Eerie.

The painting had a title—three characters forming a word I didn't immediately recognize.

姑獲鳥

A short while later, Kyogokudo arrived, carrying one of those lidded trays used for delivering noodles.

Seeing the pale-skinned man in his undershirt carrying a noodle tray made me laugh despite myself.

"Would you believe it?" he was saying. "I get to the place, right? And the guy says 'You look hungry, and this will be done in a second, so why don't you just wait there.' Hah! As if that's going to fool me. He may pretend to be nice, but he just didn't want to take the trouble to bring it over here. So I carried it back myself—what a pain! You were the *tanuki* soba, right?"

I wasn't anything. You picked my supper for me. I just didn't complain because frankly, I didn't care.

"I know they let anybody who wants to sell soba noodles these days, but do you really think a store can survive in a place like this? They're not cheap, either. You know they're asking twenty yen a person?"

"Wait, you're saying they have a bad location? Aren't they right next to your store? And they've been here since before the war, haven't they?"

I remembered coming by his house as a student and stopping by the restaurant next door to eat some cold *zaru* soba. A serving had been fifteen *sen* at the time.

"Actually, that lot was one of the few that burned in the earthquake. This area was spared most of the damage, so people from the bad places all moved in," Kyogokudo said between mouthfuls of deep-fried bean curd. He looked at the book on the table. "By the way, I saw you glaring at that book when I came in. Something wrong with it?"

"Nothing in particular. I was just wondering how you read the title of this painting here. The last character is 'bird,' and the next to last is 'take,' and the first is, what, 'mother-in-law'? 'Kokakucho,' maybe? Some kind of ghost?"

"Ah, no. That's an *ubume*," Kyogokudo said, slurping his udon.

"Oh, okay, I've heard of that. The revenant that wanders around trying to give its child away so someone can take care of it—ah, thus the kid in the painting. But what's the reasoning behind reading those characters '*ubume*'?"

"You don't. The *kokakucho* is a demon from China. Sometimes called the 'night courtesan' or 'empyrean maiden.' It's a shape-changer. When it puts on feathers, it's a bird; when it takes them off, it becomes a female ghost. It's in the *Compendium of Materia Medica*, for one. I even think there was an article with a bit to do about the *ubume* in the *Record of All Things in China and Japan*. I'm guessing that Sekien borrowed the title for his painting straight from there; but something doesn't quite fit. The Chinese *kokakucho* are said to steal away girl infants and raise them as their own, which is the complete opposite of how the *ubume* behaves, yes? That, and you usually write '*ubume*' with the characters for 'giving birth' and 'woman.'"

産女

Kyogokudo was adept at talking while shoveling down his noodles, but I always stopped eating when I spoke, and my soba soon got soggy.

"So the *ubume*—the Japanese one—is the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth, right?"

"Not the ghost per se. It's more like the woman's *regrets* taking on a physical form. Whether you're talking about the daughter of the Yamadas down the street, or the pampered princess of some noble house, if they die in childbirth, their regrets come back to walk the earth just like you see there. That's why, when one of these shows up, it's a sure sign there's been a family tragedy. As evidence that they're not ghosts, they don't go after a particular person; and you have to admit, she doesn't look as hateful as most ghosts you see."

I had noticed this too, of course.

"I'm sure it's just our lack of the proper perception," Kyogokudo said, sounding thoughtful. "But while we may say 'oh, it's the regrets of a woman who died in childbirth,' it's really not at all easy to guess what form that would actually take, is it?"

"Well, of course it's not. You can't exactly look at regret and say 'yup, that there's a regret.'"

"And yet we represent something as complex as the heart with a little heart shape. Maybe it's based on the form of the actual organ, or a drinking cup, but as soon as anyone sees that simple shape, they instantly understand it to be a heart. Yet the heart doesn't have a form."

"I guess..."

"The *ubume*'s quite the same—it's a symbol. It just isn't recognized in the modern world. Partly that's because the death rate of women during childbirth has gone down, but that doesn't explain everything. The entire realm of the supernatural is fast leaving common parlance and becoming a more individual experience. And nowadays when people do talk about it, the focus is still on the people and their stories. Ghosts and haunted houses, for example—mostly we hear about the person that the ghost hates, not about the ghost's particular pathos. You know what the modern *ubume* is? It's when Ms. So-and-so dies due to malpractice and shows up by Dr. I. Dunnit's bedside crying night after night. How far the noble regret has fallen!"

"Well, I'm sure childbirth was much more of a life-or-death experience in the past, and when something went wrong, there wouldn't have been anyone to blame. So a woman who died that way would've had regrets, sure, but probably not ghostly hatred."

For some reason, my current mental state was allowing me to accept my friend's conversation without my usual protestations. Kyogokudo finished drinking the soup his noodles had been sitting in; then, grunting in response to my latest remark, he trundled off to the kitchen, returning with two cups of cold barley tea. He offered me one.

Then he muttered, almost to himself, "But why would someone mix up the *kokakucho* and the *ubume*? Stealing a child and giving a child away are completely opposite things."

Having finally finished my *tanuki* soba, and feeling thirsty, I leaned back and drained my tea in one refreshing gulp. "What does the *ubume* do after it gives up the child, anyway?"

"Nothing. Some say if you receive the child, it grows heavy and crushes you, or you fall ill, but those elements were probably tacked on later to make for a scarier telling. Other versions have it that the foster parent becomes supernaturally strong, but that starts sounding like a classic heroic ordeal—which isn't scary to the modern audience in the least. But there was one thing..." Kyogokudo twisted his neck and glanced up at the bookshelf behind him.

It seemed that the book he was looking for wasn't to be found, however, and so after a moment he returned his gaze to me and resumed his lecture.

"Now Sekien did his best work in the An'ei era, 1772-1780, but go one hundred years further back, and *ubume*-fear was alive and well. I believe it was the third year of the Jokyo era, or 1686—just about a hundred years before Sekien's death—when a particularly excellent record of the *ubume* was pub-

lished in the *Report on One Hundred Stories*."

Then, Kyogokudo's eyes seemed to fix on a spot in the empty air three inches above my head, and he began reading from the *Report on One Hundred Stories* from memory. "When a woman who is with child passes away, her attachment to the babe takes physical form. She appears then as an apparition, drenched in blood from the waist down, and crying like a bird: *wobaryo, wobaryo*."

"Well? Much scarier than looking at this picture, if you ask me. Although, the general attitude toward the supernatural that you find in the *Report* is one of denial."

"And you've memorized that entry? Have you nothing better to do with your time?"

"Oh, but this is quite intriguing." Kyogokudo picked up the book from the table, waving it slowly for emphasis. "First of all, the *ubume* you find in the oral tradition—in some regions it's called the '*ugume*'—is just as scary. The lower half of her body will be drenched in blood like in that account I just gave you, or will be covered with oozing wounds. It's ten times as frightening as this later stuff. Why, to look at this painting here, you'd think she'd been out taking a dip and got caught in the rain. Hmm, I wonder if Sekien did it that way on purpose?"

"Huh?"

Something was wrong.

"Isn't the lower half of her body red with blood in that painting too?"

That's what I saw, I'm sure of it.

"Don't start daydreaming on me. How could a monotone illustration be red?"

Kyogokudo handed me the book.

The painting there on the page was identical to what I'd seen before—except that the woman held garments wrapped around her waist. On closer inspection, I also noticed that the baby looked fat and rather healthy.

There wasn't a drop of blood on them.

Yet the woman still had that distracted expression, making the scene just as creepy.

Kyogokudo narrowed his eyes. "Sekiguchi, you may yet possess the necessary logic for understanding the *ubume* that the rest of the world has lost."

The wind chime rang again.

The bookseller cleaned up the remnants of our dinner; then, uncovering his jar, he offered me a candy. "Buddha bone?"

"Blasphemy. You're going to hell for sure," I said, taking one of the fragments.

My eyes were still on the painting in the book. Strangely, it didn't seem half as odd now as it had moments before. Perhaps the color I had seen had

merely been a trick of the light.

Kyogokudo, too, picked up a candy. "Oh? I think I stand a good chance of salvation," he said. "Incidentally, this candy had a fascinating life as Siddhartha Gautama—and a fascinating birth. Very unusual."

It took me a moment before I understood what he was talking about.

"No, wait, the Buddha isn't a very good example," he went on. "I know—how about Taira-no-Masakado, the false emperor? According to the book *Straight Talk on the Lotus Sutra* he spent a good thirty-three months in the womb."

As if by a miracle, we had returned to our original topic. My friend had finally deigned to discuss the story of the abnormally long pregnancy—the whole reason I had come to see him in the first place.

"Musashibo Benkei is another famous example," he went on. "Going by what it says in *The Record of Yoshitsune*, he took eighteen months to pop out, whereas according to one of the *otogizoshi*,* the *Story of Benkei*, he was in there a whole three years and three months, finally emerging from the womb in the thirty-ninth month of pregnancy! He was a real demon-child too, born with hair and a full set of teeth. Oh, and in the *Collection of Things Seen and Heard in the Keicho Era*, there's a story about this loose cannon named Otori Ichibei who claimed, when he was finally caught and thrown in prison, that he had been in the womb for eighteen months. Of course, that's according to his telling, so it's a little suspect."

"Why are they all villains? I mean, other than the Buddha."

"Hey, Benkei's no villain. He just liked a good rumble every now and then. But, you do bring up a good point. Why, even Masakado was considered the biggest bad guy in the world until just recently—"

"So he's still a bad guy," I said, not really sure what my friend was talking about.

"Ah, and what about the red-faced ogre," Kyogokudo continued, "Shuten-doji of Mt. Ibuki—he's a good one."

"Don't you mean Mt. Oe?"

"That's just the more famous version of the story. Either way, you know the one I'm talking about—the big guy. In the *Doji of Ibuki*, also an *otogizoshi*, by the way, the ogre was born in the thirty-third month. In the *Chronicle of Times Prior to the Great Pacification* he was born in the sixteenth month."

"But, Kyogokudo," I said, "look at those numbers: 16, 18, 33, three years and three months... Kind of hard to believe, isn't it? I mean, those numbers had to have been made up after the fact."

"Indubitably, yes. It was only when these men became massacring ogres, or branded 'nefarious evildoers' that their inauspicious pasts were retroactively created."

*Prose narratives written primarily in the Muromachi Period (1392-1573).

"Now you're talking quantum mechanics again."

"Indeed I am. All ogres must be born under unusual circumstances—there is a widespread and deeply rooted conviction in folk societies which insists that this is so. The idea was particularly pervasive in Japan. The corollary was also true: anyone with an unusual birth would grow to become an ogre. Because of this, any story of a real ogre or evildoer who *didn't* have an unusual birth lacked persuasiveness. So, once an individual was observed to be an ogre, you went back to form a past for him involving an unusual birth story. It's cause and effect in reverse. Of course, that doesn't give us a thread of real evidence to prove that the product of an actual irregular birth must become an ogre."

"Well, aren't there any examples of someone who had an unusual birth but who grew up to be a normal person in spite of it?"

"Not a one. Because the future fate of a child born in such circumstances was so well known, back in the old days these children were always killed."

"Ah ha! But Shutendoji lived, didn't he? If they were so zealous about killing off said kids, there wouldn't be any ogres or evildoers who reached adulthood."

"Like I told you, it wasn't until Shutendoji and others like him were branded ogres that their histories were retroactively created. All you have to say then is that the parents failed to kill the child and instead abandoned him, or some such. And if, by some chance, you found a person who was born unusually, but was hidden from view until he grew up to become a regular person, you would go back and erase his irregular past."

I finally understood why Kyogokudo had spent such a long time dismantling my worldview before going ahead with this conversation. I now found myself well prepared to comprehend the particular conceptual structures surrounding unusual birth as he explained them—far better prepared than I would have been had we jumped right into the discussion at the moment I arrived at the store. If he had just gone ahead and answered my question directly, I wouldn't have understood a thing—and not only that, but I surely would have walked away with the folk-belief that a woman who is pregnant for twenty months would, by necessity, give birth to an ogre or evildoer. Then, I probably would have gone home and written a fine article with the usual scientific trappings, set with some gaudily sparkling gems of wild conjecture, all without knowing how what I wrote could have inadvertently ruined the life of any child born under such strange circumstances.

"Well, Sekiguchi-sensei, it seems you've come to an understanding of sorts. We may not be able to comprehend the past collective delusions of a culture, but we should know better than to boldly misinterpret them and walk around making as if we knew what we were talking about. Modern society can't even understand the concept of the demon-child as it was seen in the past. And

actually, merely not understanding would be fine, but what happens now is that the demon-child is 'understood' to have an entirely different meaning. How this can be allowed is, to me, incomprehensible. You're free to write your articles, but once you put down your pen, the article takes on a life of its own. I would have you refrain from scrawling something so irresponsible as to doom an innocent child to growing up as an ogre or serpent or worse."

Kyogokudo took a sip of his tea. It was as if he'd read my mind.

"Don't worry, I lost any desire to write an article about this a long time ago. I think, all things considered, that it would be in poorer taste than your candy jar there." This I truly believed.

Seeing me grown suddenly meek, my friend scratched his jaw with an air of slight embarrassment, feeling perhaps that his medicine had worked a little too effectively.

"Who told you this wild story in the first place, anyway?" he asked suddenly.

"Your sister," I replied, as nonchalantly as could be.

Kyogokudo's expression immediately turned sour, and he began muttering about his vagabond, delinquent sibling. I laughed despite myself, having recently heard his sister describe him in much the same fashion.

"It's no laughing matter," my friend informed me, now looking positively dejected. As her brother, he had a responsibility to her, he explained; and his expression grew more and more troubled as he went on about how worried he'd been about her lately. It struck me as remarkable, how my utterly rational friend would completely lose his cool whenever the subject of his little sister came up.

Kyogokudo's sister was named Atsuko. She was a lively, active girl, in contrast with her ever unhealthy brother. Where Kyogokudo's face wouldn't have looked out of place on the Reaper, Atsuko was a startling beauty; most people who didn't know my friend well assumed she came from his wife's side of the family. She was about ten years younger than him—in her early twenties—and had always displayed an independent spirit. As soon as she graduated from high school she had announced that she was setting off on her own, and had left home without further ado. After that she had worked to save up money for college, studied hard on her own, and gotten accepted; but she had soon quit, citing abject boredom. This, if nothing else, was proof that she shared her brother's blood. Currently she was working for a publisher in Kanda where she held a full-time position as an editor and writer for a magazine. In fact, I had often gotten work there simply because of that connection. Perhaps partly on account of the responsibilities she had chosen to shoulder, I had always considered Atsuko an unusually well grounded young lady.

"Lest it impinge on your sister's honor—she never intended to report on this pregnancy," I thought to add. In his own way, my eccentric friend cared

for his sister, and always had an opinion on what she was doing. I didn't want my disclosure to be the cause of a sibling squabble. "As you well know, your sister would never dream of writing something in such grotesquely poor taste. She was doing a story on the pregnant woman's husband."

"Why—what's the deal with the husband?" Kyogokudo asked dubiously.

"Well, apparently, he disappeared about a year and a half ago."

"So? Nothing unusual about that, these days. What's she writing a story about that for?"

"Now, now," I responded with an air of importance, "let me finish."

"You see, this husband of hers vanished from a sealed room like a puff of smoke. Quite the mystery. Certainly worthy of an article or two."

Kyogokudo guffawed and lifted an eyebrow, favoring me with a look he usually reserved for utter imbeciles. "Ridiculous!" he snorted. "I knew this was going to turn into one of your hack mystery stories. Let me guess, it turns out there was a secret door—or no, wait—he found an ingenious way to escape using a single piece of thread!"

"You're right that it's the sort of thing you often read about in novels, but this was the first time I'd heard of it happening in real life. You have to understand, it doesn't matter how he pulled off, it's still worth a story. Anyway, since I had written detective-type articles before, your sister came to me for advice. But, as I listened to the background of the whole thing, I became more interested in the wife's predicament. So I started asking around, and found the rumor had spread much further than expected."

"Which only served to further tickle your morbid fancies, I'm sure. Atsuko must have been hard up for material to come to *you* for advice. There's a street conjurer in Asakusa who gives better by half. But I think I see how the flawed reasoning goes: the husband's been gone for a year and a half, so of course this woman's been pregnant for twenty months; otherwise the math doesn't work." Kyogokudo picked up his now tepid tea and took a swallow, grimacing. "But, Sekiguchi, what if this woman saw a man after her husband disappeared, got pregnant, and then lied to everybody to cover it up? That's far more plausible than any other explanation."

"Yet the pregnancy was discovered only a short time after the husband—who, by the way, had taken his wife's surname and been adopted into the family—had disappeared. She was already three months along then."

"Ah, thus the twenty-month pregnancy. Still..." Kyogokudo's words trailed off. His gaze wandered out toward the veranda.

After a moment's hesitation, I decided to relate to him everything I'd heard from the rumors.

"As you might imagine, most of it is pretty suspect—so much so that it's incredible how far the rumors have spread."

"The farther-fetched the rumor, the more the masses lap it up. For future

reference, Master Sekiguchi, tell me, just what are the masses imagining in their fertile little minds?"

I was surprised that my friend would lower himself to show further interest in the matter, but I suspected this had much to do with the fact that his sister was involved.

"Well, most of it is the sort of trite moralizing you were talking about before. One idea is that one of the mother's ancestors generations back committed infanticide, and now the baby's ghost is getting revenge, or else a barren bride generations ago was tormented and bullied to death and is now working out her grudge on her husband's descendant. The story you came up with is out there too, with the wife taking on a lover. They even try to use that to explain why the husband vanished. You see, he didn't just disappear, he was killed by the lover, and his ghost is now getting its revenge by delaying the pregnancy. In this version of events, the child doesn't belong to the missing husband but is the lover's kid instead. Another version has it that the husband is still alive, but he has some reason to stay hidden. In this scenario, the wife was raped soon after he left, resulting in a pregnancy. She wants her husband—who knows nothing of what happened—to come home, but if she actually gave birth, it would be clear he wasn't the father, so—"

"So what, she's just 'holding back'? I'd like to see someone hold back flatulence for that long—let alone labor!"

"These are just rumors. They don't have to make logical sense. There are some even funnier ones, too. Like the child's father is a monkey, and she doesn't want to give birth to a hairy baby..."

"So she's just biding her time? That's shoots right beyond the realm of common sense, straight into good old rumor-mongering. Completely divorced from reality! I was hoping for something with even a *little* basis in fact, but this is just cruelty. You couldn't even make a good comedy out of this story. It lacks both style and substance."

"True enough. But one of the rumors was a little more intriguing. That one says that the vanished husband had gone to Germany during the war, where he worked developing drugs in a secret Nazi laboratory. Then he brought the drugs back when the war ended, and used his wife as a human test subject."

"For what kind of tests? What's to gain by delaying a birth? You'll have to do better than that to rate 'intriguing.'"

"Hey, don't get ticked off at *me*. I'm not the one spreading the rumors. In any case, according to the story the drugs weren't for delaying labor. He was trying to cultivate human cells to create a duplicate of another human being. That seems plausible, does it not?"

"Cloning? In theory, yes. But not with today's technology, not by a long shot. Give it another hundred years."

"How many times do I have to tell you? We're not talking about a true

story, here. We're talking about a wild rumor—a rumor, in fact, that says the tiny life growing in that woman's belly is none other than the *Führer* himself: Adolf Hitler."

Kyogokudo rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and breathed a long sigh. He managed a weak laugh, as if he had been stunned by my tale's utter lack of redeeming value. "If I knew you were going to come to me with this, I would have closed up shop early and slept through the afternoon. When I imagine people walking down the street thinking things like that it makes me want to curl up and die."

Indeed, as I listened to myself tell it, the story had sounded more and more like the worst kind of gossip, baseless and vapid. It was more or less slander, really. I felt embarrassed for having been so intrigued when I first heard it.

"So just who is this poor woman about whom people are saying such horrible things?" my friend asked, his voice pained, as if he were barely able to stomach the thought of the trials she must be facing.

"As you surmised, she's a woman in the uncomfortable position of wanting to see a good doctor, yet being unable to. Primarily because her family runs its own obstetrics and gynecology clinic that's been going on since Edo times."

"Uh-uh... I'm pretty sure there weren't any gynecologists in Edo—hard to imagine they've been in business that long."

"Actually, the head of the family started out as the doctor for some *daimyo* lord in Shikoku. You know, one of those appointed court physicians. When the Meiji Restoration* rolled through, the good doctor's descendants followed the *daimyo* up to Tokyo, and in the confusion built a little hospital. Thus the family business. Through early Showa, which is to say in the years before the war in China, they were doing a bit of everything: internal medicine, surgery, and so forth. They got pretty big, but for some reason, right around the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war their business took a downturn, and now they're pretty much reduced to gynecology. It sounds like they didn't have a single talented physician in the place for quite a few years. They probably hadn't progressed much beyond the days when a doctor would look at your veins like a palm reader to divine what was wrong with you. Not an approach that's going to get you very far in this day and age. As you've said, advances in medicine are made on a daily basis.

"You might think they could've just hired a doctor with some real ability, but it wasn't that simple. They didn't want to break the family line of a court-appointed physician. So, eventually, they did the next best thing and adopted an elite son through marriage right out of university."

"And he's the one who vanished?"

"The very same. And now their daughter has fallen prey to some inexpli-

cable illness and can't give birth. Strange rumors spring up. But being a proud clinic with a history of treating women, they can't just send their daughter off to some other hospital, can they? The word would get out and they'd lose what few patients they still had. It was one misfortune after another, insult added to injury, and so they retreated further and further until they were backed into a corner..."

My friend made no reply. The silence grew thick between us.

Maybe I said too much?

My throat was parched. Earlier, I had drunk my barley tea in one gulp; the cup before me was empty. I had just decided, after a bit of vacillation, that I'd ask for another serving when Kyogokudo finally spoke.

"Sekiguchi. This clinic—it's not the Kuonji Clinic in Zoshigaya by any chance? And the adopted son-in-law who ran away—his name wasn't Makio..."

It was.

"What, you knew? Here I was telling you the whole tale, and you knew all along? Well, doesn't that make me feel dumb!"

I felt his eyes on me. It was that withering glare of his.

"You should! You mean to tell me you never once realized, with all your talking and asking of questions, who this was?" my friend demanded, his fierce look intensifying. "If I were you, I'd stop trusting my brain entirely. It's clearly not doing its job in the memory department."

I had no idea what he was talking about. "What? What do you mean? Why are you angry?"

"So you have no memory of Makio Kuonji, formerly Makio Fujino, nickname Fujimaki? None at all?"

"What..."

A vague image surfaced in the dim recesses of my mind, then suddenly took form.

It was a boy a grade ahead of me in school: thick glasses, a kind face, irritatingly shy.

"That Fujimaki? No... But I thought he went to Germany. Wasn't he—"

"So you think he went to Germany and just stayed there, through the war, living happily as can be? How many in our generation *didn't* get drafted, anyway? Even you, who were supposed to get a researcher's deferment, got sent to boot camp by a clerical error."

"True... But *you* didn't fight in the war, did you, Kyogokudo?"

"We're not talking about me."

Kyogokudo grimaced and tilted back his cup to get at the last remaining drops of barley tea. "It is true that Fujimaki went to Germany. Though I don't know what connections he pulled to get there, or why he *wanted* to go to Germany, for that matter. But if I recall correctly, he came back the year after

*The rebellion that dismantled the feudal Tokugawa government in 1868.

the war started. Which is to say right after the war started, since things hadn't gotten going until late in the previous year anyway. Following which, he entered the Imperial University medical school where he had been planning to study all along. But when things started going badly on the war front three years later, they shipped him off to be a soldier. Luckily for him, the conflict ended just before he was sent to the front lines in Siberia, and he returned to civilian life, returned to university, got the degree he'd always wanted, got his doctor's license—"

"And was adopted into the Kuonji Clinic plan. Okay, I follow you."

"That rumor about the Nazis probably stems from his history, don't you think? I hadn't heard word of him in a while, but *vanishing*..." Kyogokudo let the word fade off into silence.

Makio Fujino had been one class above us in our old high school. He was a quiet boy, shy to the point of cowardice; he'd always wanted to be a doctor. Blindly enough I had never imagined that he could be the man at the center of the entire affair I had been following. To start with, I had no idea what had become of him after the war, nor had I thought to link the nickname "Fujimaki" to the name "Makio Kuonji." Now early memories of my schoolmate were gradually resurfacing in my mind.

"Wait, back when we were in school, didn't he fall in love with some girl? She was from that family—I can't quite remember—they were doctors, right?"

"That they were. In the summer of '39, we all went out on the Kishimojin* festival day. He met that Kuonji girl and it was love at first sight. Don't you remember making fun of him for being so starry-eyed? Well, I guess he came back from the war and made his dreams come true: he got his degree and he got the girl. Not bad."

As one might suspect from his earlier recitation of centuries-old passages, Kyogokudo's memory was impressive.

For my part, this sudden turn of events had left me speechless.

Kyogokudo had been rubbing his jaw at first, but his hand had gradually traveled upwards until he was now busily scratching his head through long, matted hair. "Why did you have to come to me with this? You know I live all the way out here in relative isolation because I don't want to deal with this kind of thing."

He returned his hand to his jaw and gazed down at the floor. He looked like the pictures I'd seen of the novelist Akutagawa Ryunosuke—his brows furrowed beneath an unruly mop of hair. For a while he sat there frozen.

"You know—" Suddenly his eyes glanced up at me again. It made him look even more like Akutagawa. "Now that I know a friend is at the middle of all this, I can't play the unconcerned bystander, can I?" He looked down

* Sanskrit "Hariti," the goddess of children and childbirth.

again. "But this—this isn't my line of work."

He thought for a bit more, still making his Akutagawa face, before continuing. "Sekiguchi. You're not doing anything tomorrow, are you? Why don't you head down to Jinbocho. Our old friend Enokizu who's set himself up as a private eye down there was in the same class as Fujimaki. He probably knows more of the guy's circle than we do. He might know something, and once he hears about what happened, I'm sure he won't want to put it down." Then, an inscrutable expression on his face, he added, "You need to take responsibility for this." And then he was done.

It was past ten o'clock at night when I finally took my leave of Kyogokudo. Outside it was completely dark, though the temperature hadn't fallen.

The bookseller warned me that I would probably trip and fall going down the hill at such an hour, and tried to make me take a lantern. I told him I'd have taken a flashlight if he had one, but I'd feel like a walking anachronism carrying a lantern. "Besides, the moon is bright enough anyway."

"Just keep your eyes on your feet if you can."

That night, as usual, the long, meager slope down from the book shop was completely deserted. There were no street lights to show the way—only the oil-clay walls shining white in the moonlight, seeming to stretch down and away forever. In the distance to which they led I could see nothing at all.

I felt strange.

I was trying to recall the content of our conversation that day, but even when I tried to put the fragments I remembered in some kind of order the whole seemed to elude me. I thought the part where I was proven unable to distinguish between real and imagined experiences came first. Or maybe it was the part about the relative nature of past realities seen through records. *Wait, how did it all end again?*

There's a field of science called quantum mechanics.

We can't tell what the world is doing where we're not looking. For instance, the other side of this wall... There might be nothing there whatsoever. And how about this road—where does it lead? I had the strange impression that the ground beneath my feet was growing softer.

I stumbled over my own shoe. Suddenly it seemed that the air down by my feet had grown viscous, so much so that I couldn't tell where the surface of the road ended and the air above it began.

Oh. It's dark. I can't see my feet.

If I can't see them, I don't know what's going on down there.

Anything's possible.

An *ubume*, the lower half of her body glistening with blood, could be standing in the darkness behind me.

And that wouldn't be strange at all.

Is she?

I felt my skin crawl, my entire body shuddering with dread. The thought whispered: I could always just turn around and look, just to make sure that nothing was there—that nobody was behind me.

—Only when we observe it does it become true.

Kyogokudo's words came back to me in fragments.

It could be happening now. She could be standing right where I'm not looking.

—Until you observe it, the world can only be understood in terms of possibilities.

Which meant the possibility existed that an *ubume* was there.

I walked faster.

The faster I went, the more my feet tangled beneath me.

—The chances that you and all the world around you are just a phantasm and the chances it's all real are exactly equal.

How long had I been going down that slope, anyway? The scenery hadn't changed one bit. Would that wall ever end? And what *was* behind it?

Is anything I'm seeing real at all?

I was sweating. My throat was dry.

If that's really how the world works, anything could happen.

—There is nothing that is strange in this world, Sekiguchi.

So that's what he meant.

She's standing there, behind me, the ubume. Looking sad. No, just distracted.

And the face of the child she's holding in her arms...

Fujimaki—

I was a little more than two-thirds of the way down the hill when a wave of dizziness sent me reeling.

When the blade of daylight through my eyelids woke me, the hour hand on the clock had just passed eleven. My senses were dull, as if someone had poured lead into my skull and left it to harden.

Not dull enough, however, to numb me to the unbearable heat and humidity in the bedroom. It felt like a sauna. The sunlight reflecting off the *tatami* was blinding.

Now, a day later, the events at Kyogokudo seemed as distant and unreal as a dream.

I slowly dressed and stepped out of the room to find my wife, Yukie, in the kitchen with her sleeves rolled up. She was making rice-flower dumplings.

Yukie grumbled as I slumped in. The night before had been positively tropical, and I had moaned in my sleep so much she hardly slept a wink. As she spoke I became aware of a weariness in her demeanor that I hadn't noticed at first.

"How was Chizuko?" she asked without turning to look at me.

Chizuko was Kyogokudo's better half. Our wives had hit it off remarkably well and would probably have been close friends even without their husbands to draw them together. I told her his wife had been out, and she nodded, concluding that Chizuko must have gone to the festival after all. I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but I didn't ask.

I had my lunch and waited for the midday sun to begin its downward journey before I headed out.

It was twenty minutes to the nearest station: Nakano on the National Railways Central Line out of Tokyo—what was formerly the Kobu Railway. Over the past year, there had been a startling amount of growth around the station, some of it due to Nakano's close proximity to Shinjuku, where the rate of development was phenomenal. The Army school and facilities that had crowded the area before the war had always given it a rather drab appearance, but now shopping streets were springing up one after the other, making it feel as if the district was experiencing a true rebirth.

By the time I arrived at the station, my shirt was already stained with sweat. I tend to perspire a lot, and on this particular day riding the train was nothing short of misery.

I got off at Kanda and made straight for Kitansha to drop in on Kyogokudo's sister. Though one couldn't say the publisher's headquarters in a remodeled varied-use building—a dinosaur that had somehow survived the fires—was in any way appealing to the eye, it was entirely owned by the company, which was no small accomplishment.

Seven years after the end of the war, the publishing industry was booming. Paper rationing and censorship during the occupation had made times tough for a while, but the massive sales of books and magazines were more than enough to overcome the losses. The resurgence had begun with reprints of things published before the war; soon, collected works and dictionaries were rolling off the presses, followed in more recent years by foreign novels in translation. Even works depicting the ravages of war—something unthinkable a decade ago—were boldly displayed in storefronts.

The pulp *kasutori* entertainment magazines—named after a vile liquor popular among the degenerates of the day—had showed up almost as soon as the bombs stopped dropping, and had gone through cycle after cycle of a first issue followed by an inevitable ban on publication, a short period of downtime, and resumed publication. Most still survived today, their names and appearances greatly changed.

Kitansha, however, had been publishing since before the war, which set it apart from the newer outfits riding the wave of freedom that gave the *kasutori* magazines their momentum. Though not quite top-tier, it was a comfortably midsized publisher, putting out three monthly magazines.

Kyogokudo's sister worked in the *Kitan Monthly* editorial room on the third floor. As its name suggested, this was the magazine that started Kitansha as a publisher, and it was certainly still the crown jewel of the company. Though sales were not outstanding, circulation had been steadily growing for the past few years.

Kitan Monthly's mission was to shine the light of reason upon all the strange tales and mysterious events of the day and unravel whatever mysteries were to be found. Though the magazine's name* hardly distinguished it from the many lowbrow celebrations of the bizarre, the erotic, and the grotesque that had flooded the market, its content was relatively straight laced; the editors scrupulously avoided printing the sorts of sensationalist fare that filled the *kasutori* rags. The magazine's strong points were equally sober: history, society, and science. On rare occasions it would contain a piece on parapsychology, Kyogokudo's stated nemesis, and occasionally the editors might even risk mention of a possession or two, but they were prudent enough to feature such material only sparingly, and at long intervals, which meant that, though the infrequent articles on these topics might be little different than their *kasutori* counterparts, the magazine's overall orthodox editorial direction set a clear line between the *Monthly* and the bottom feeders, protecting it from the censure and legal troubles its baser brethren had suffered.

Two years before, under the somewhat suspect auspices of being the friend of a *Monthly* editor's brother, I had managed to secure an introduction to the editors of the literary magazine *Contemporary Literature* on the second floor of

**Kitan* = "unusual tales"

Kitansha, and had since then written for them frequently.

Visits to that office were not the only reason I came to the publishing house, however. Though I would have loved to do nothing more than read and write about literature, when money was tight I found myself taking on side jobs of a nature not becoming my more noble work. Which is to say, I wrote highly dubious articles for the *kasutori* magazines under a nom de plume. Since there were as many of these tabloids as there are mushrooms after a heavy rain, they suffered a chronic dearth of writers, and as long as you weren't picky, there was plenty of work to be had.

Yet though it wasn't overly difficult for me to swallow my pride that far, I didn't find the kind of articles that were popular at the time—conspiracy exposés and lustful confessions—all that easy to write. Which is why, for the most part, I had to make do with penning articles about strange and mysterious happenings—the sort of thing that had recently been popular but was now on the verge of going out of style. The hardest part was that most of the good stories in the genre had already been done to death; it was a challenge to find fresh material worth writing about. Thus, I often made my way to the editorial room on the third floor to beg for scraps. When I was fortunate enough to scrape together the seeds of a story in this way, I could then pile on a healthy dose of drama and crank out a suitably lurid article. Since I was basically living hand to mouth, I took anything and everything *Kitan Monthly* didn't want, which meant I really had nothing to say in my defense when Kyogokudo saw fit to cast aspersions on my work.

On this day when I dropped in, the editor-in-chief and main writer for the magazine, a man named Makoto Nakamura, was there working on a piece of copy.

"Is Miss Chuzenji in, by any chance?" I asked, dispensing with the usual pleasantries.

Chuzenji was Kyogokudo's sister's surname.

Kyogokudo's real name—he had one, of course—was Akihiko Chuzenji, though few called him by it these days, most preferring, as I did, to use the name of his store. Not that this made a great deal of sense. "Kyogokudo" had originally been the name of a sweets shop in Kyoto run by my friend's wife's family. When he opened his bookshop, he had simply lifted the name.

"Ah, if it isn't Mr. Sekiguchi," editor-in-chief Nakamura looked up and spoke with a smile. He was always maddeningly friendly. "Has something come up? Please, please come in. It's far too hot out there." His deep voice rang out into the hallway, beckoning me inside.

I sat down in a chair meant for visitors. Nakamura came over, fanning himself with a rolled-up stack of writing paper, and sat down across from me.

"I'm sorry, you must be very busy. If I'm interrupting something I'm happy to come back some other time."

"No, it's not really busy here at all. You know, I've been working on next month's issue, but it wasn't going so well, so I was just thinking I might browse some used bookstores for a change of pace." He hailed from the south of Japan, and his words had a slight accent to them. "Ah, that reminds me. You did some research on bacteria, didn't you?"

"Slime molds," I corrected him.

"Right, right. Well you must know Dr. Kumagusu Minakata. As it so happens, I was planning on doing a special to coincide with the twelfth anniversary of his passing*—maybe you'd like to write something about your slime molds for it? Weren't they those intriguing half-animal half-plant creatures? Maybe something about their unique position: the 'sacred link between animal and vegetable.'"

"Ah, yes," I said, caught off guard by the unexpected offer, "I'd love to write something... But didn't Dr. Kumagusu pass away in '41? It's still a little early for a twelfth anniversary."

To tell the truth, I wasn't particularly interested in writing about slime molds these days. I had only gotten into the field at the urging of a professor to whom I was indebted, not out of any particular love for the things. The editor-in-chief nodded and muttered something about getting the math wrong, and how it would have to be the year after next.

"By the way," I asked, "whatever happened to that story about the disappearing man that Miss Chuzenji was on?"

"Oh?" Nakamura raised an eyebrow. "Were you interested in that? I had my hopes up for the story, too, but in the end it didn't pan out!"

I had intended to make my inquiry as casual as possible, but it seemed that the man suspected something, because where he had been mumbling and somewhat dejected only moments before, suddenly he was bright and happy and his voice was booming. It made me feel uncomfortable.

"It didn't pan out—so it was just a rumor?"

"No, it was true. The young doctor does seem to have completely vanished from a locked room. The problem was, Chuzenji told me that rather vicious rumors had been springing up about the whole thing, and we couldn't run the story at the risk of sounding slanderous. Surely you appreciate our position."

"So she stopped reporting on it?"

This was a little unexpected.

Nakamura scratched his head as if he were embarrassed by the whole affair. "Ah, yes, well, I might've had her carry on, but contrary to her delicate appearance, that Chuzenji has a stubborn streak. Apparently, the wife this

*One of the anniversaries of a person's death memorialized in the Japanese Buddhist tradition.

man left behind has been pregnant now for an entire year and a half. It's about her that the rumors have been flying—not nice ones, either. Whenever Chuzenji tried to get the scoop on the husband, the topic always had a way of drifting back to the wife. End result: she could write as objective an article as possible, and still end up fanning the flames of the rumors.

"We're no sell-it-and-run *kasutori* magazine," she told me," he said with a grimace. "Reporting on this story would be irresponsible, and I won't do it. Something like that."

"So the tale of the disappearing man had a rather unseemly appendix," I replied, feigning ignorance of the situation. It irked me that a girl of twenty had such discernment, when, before my little chat with Kyogokudo, I would doubtlessly have forged ahead with the story, blissfully unaware of possible consequences.

"Oh, I fought for it," Nakamura added with a sigh. "I told her this twist just made it all the more interesting. I'd certainly never heard of a pregnant woman with her condition. So why not make a scientific examination of it, and then run both stories? The poor woman had probably suffered some sort of psychological trauma when her husband vanished, and that was delaying the pregnancy. Why, if we wrote it up properly, it'd put an end to the nasty rumors. Or so I thought."

"A very sensible idea, if you ask me. What did Chuzenji say?"

"She said we had to think of the unborn child."

Like brother, like sister.

"I believe she thought that if the father truly had disappeared there would be a reason for it, just as there was a reason those rumors spread. Even should her story focus on a man's disappearance from a locked room and, as a side note, the psychological effects of such a vanishing act on his wife, she couldn't write about it without touching on the underlying reasons, which would bring the whole unusual pregnancy into the spotlight. Once you write an article it's out there forever, and the innocent child would have to deal with that for the rest of his or her life."

Nakamura shook his head. "I've been in this business a long time, and I'll admit, I've gotten a bit mercantile in my thinking. But I realized she's right. It's not enough just to sell magazines. And just because you might go about it in a serious fashion, it doesn't mean you can write whatever you please. Even the most trifling of articles can have repercussions for certain individuals—for a whole society, even. I feel like she lifted a veil from my eyes. Classic case of the pupil instructing the teacher."

Nakamura must have really wanted to unburden himself to someone, for I had never heard him talk quite so much or so quickly. Since I had so recently experienced the same humbling realization he had, I felt a little like I was being chastised all over again—vicariously, no less—this time by Kyogokudo's

sister. Yet I owed her a debt of gratitude for her decision to abandon the story; after all, it was an old friend of mine's child whose future was at stake.

I never knew she had it in her, standing up to another editor—and a direct superior, no less. I wonder what her brother would think of it? I wondered, genuinely curious to hear what he would have to say about it.

"One thing's for sure," the editor-in-chief continued. "That girl's got a—what would you call it?—a sense of purpose like you don't often see these days. Why, compared to her, the young boys we get in here are wishy-washy good-for-nothings. To be perfectly honest, when I first saw her walk in with that cute, fresh-out-of-school face, I thought 'this one's gonna get eaten alive.' But was I ever wrong! She can *work*, and well, too. You can take any one of our hires and tell them to do something, and they'll bang it out, but I'll be damned if they'll do anything more. Some can't even do what you tell them! But Chuzenji, you tell her one thing, and she'll do that and nine other things you hadn't got around to telling her yet. She's a professional already. Quite the gem in the rough. You be sure to thank her brother for me."

"That's quite some praise," I observed. "I assume you wouldn't want it shared with her directly?"

"What, and have her throwing her weight around more than she already does? I've got my own position to consider!" he added with a hearty laugh.

Suspecting that I'd learn no more about Kuonji Clinic here, I decided to take my leave. But I had no sooner risen from my chair than he stopped me. "You know, Mr. Sekiguchi," he said, his voice suddenly dropping to a hushed whisper, "we dropped that story—things being what they were—but I did hear from a different source..."

This was our usual routine. As if by afterthought, he would tell me the things he'd heard that were too sensitive or too off-beat to print in *Kitan*. Though he never mentioned it, he was well aware of my side job.

"...concerning another rumor that's been going around about that very same clinic where the vanishing took place. You see, the man in question wasn't the first to vanish! Several newborn babies disappeared before him. Of course the clinic denies everything. They say they were stillborn, or miscarriages... But there are witnesses who say they'd heard the babies cry, or that a nurse who knew what was going on had gone missing. Apparently, the police were involved at one point. So after all this, a young doctor ups and disappears, right? You know, they haven't even filed a missing persons report yet."

I raised an eyebrow and he hastily explained that he'd done a little poking around himself. "Don't tell Chuzenji, eh? There's just something about that clinic that feels wrong. And I swear I was just about to crack it open when *wham*, she floored me and I had to let it go. You won't tell her, will you?" He scratched his head and frowned. "I've my position to consider, you know," he added, breaking out with another hearty laugh.

After leaving Kitansha, I made straight for the private eye in Jinbocho that Kyogokudo had recommended I turn to. This wasn't just some fellow that did a little snooping around on the side—Reiji Enokizu was a member of a rare breed, a genuine professional detective. In truth, he was the only real-life private eye I'd ever heard of.

I walked slowly for a while, pecking in at the used bookstores along the road in Jinbocho. The summer sun beat down on the pavement like a hammer. It occurred to me that the rainy season might have officially ended the day before. My preferences had always leaned away from crisp, sunny days and more toward the muggy, soggy weather of early summer. Not that it had anything to do with my research on slime molds, but my fondness for dark and damp had even earned me the biological nickname "cryptogam"—a flower that grows only in the shade—a name Enokizu had christened me with many years earlier.

Enokizu was a class ahead of me in my high school, back before the war. Suffice it to say he was a real character, even then.

Enokizu had ruled over the school like an emperor. He was better than anyone at everything: academics, art, martial arts, even fighting and romance. What's more, he was a handsome youth from a good family. He was the envy of his classmates and the subject of passionate adoration by the students at the nearby all-girls school; he had even caught the eye of some of our alumni who favored boys to the fairer sex. Jock, brain, or playboy, there was nobody who could measure up to Enokizu. In other words, he was the diametrical opposite of me, a depressive who could barely hold a simple conversation. The person who brought me and this paragon together for the first time was, of course, Kyogokudo—though he wasn't called by that name back then. I have yet to hear the story of how they came to know each other, but it seems that Enokizu, reigning emperor though he was, had himself been impressed by Kyogokudo.

Though I have no idea why, Enokizu showed a surprising amount of interest in me, too; and as we hung around together more and more often, I found we had grown quite close. Perhaps being the object of the world's affection was, seen from the other side, a very lonely thing.

The first time Enokizu met me, the first words he said were: "You look like an ape."

When someone is that outrageously rude, it's hard to be angry.

Kyogokudo warned him not to pick on me, saying that I was a depressive and suffered from aphasia under pressure, and that since he was a bit of a manic, he might try learning a bit from my example—or some similarly

obtuse advice.

In truth, Enokizu was a bit of a manic. He was always bright, and most often happy. In what was inconceivable to the typical student of the day, he evidenced a practiced flippancy and was attended upon at all times by an entourage of lady friends; Enokizu had an artlessness to him, a childlike innocence that for me was his most appealing quality. When we were together, I often forgot he was an upperclassman, and he rarely treated Kyogokudo and I as the lower classmen that we were. High school in those days was a rough place. Tough guys called the shots, and the weak might as well not even have existed. Class hierarchies were rigidly enforced, making Enokizu's willingness to buck the trend all the more a mystery. Reflecting on it now, I realize that Enokizu was one of those people who, in many ways, simply fail to fit existing societal frameworks.

Or, to put it another way, he was weird. Together, he and Kyogokudo were like the two *yokozuna*—the top-ranked Sumo wrestlers—of weirdness. This I told them quite often, though the two vehemently denied it. According to them, I was the weird one.

In every age and in every place, there are always those who do not fit the mold. In my particular high school in the pre-war days, that distinction belonged to the three of us. Enokizu, Kyogokudo, and myself were, to our school's little society, the great outsiders.

I turned off of the large street, lined with used bookstores, that I had been following. Crossing an alleyway cluttered with small shops, I came in sight of a sturdy-looking three-story building. It stood out emphatically among its neighbors, which were, for the most part, only one or two stories high.

The building was Reiji Enokizu's place of business and residence. A tailor had rented out the first floor, and there was a sort of cheap bar in the basement. The second floor housed some kind of wholesale company and the offices of a lawyer or tax attorney—I forget which. The top floor was taken up in its entirety by his live-in detective agency. While using a whole floor for such an enterprise might have seemed extravagant, since he owned the entire building, calling it extravagance would have been beside the point. He could live high off the hog just off the income from the tenants on the lower floors; this was how he managed to remain solvent doing something as ridiculous as being a private eye.

Originally, House Enokizu belonged to Japan's nobility—a distinguished family that could trace its roots back many generations. My friend's innocence was probably the result of an idyllic childhood. His father was even stranger than his son, however, and this had surely had no little effect on Enokizu's character.

His father, the Lord Enokizu, was a naturalist by hobby. His enthusiasm for wild things had gradually developed into an outright passion, and in the late '20s he had moved to Java to pursue his ecological interests. As luck would have it, the small import business he began there in his spare time took off, netting him a considerable fortune. Though the lord himself spent most of his time catching fish and collecting rare insects, he must have been gifted with no small amount of foresight to avoid becoming impoverished as was the norm among the gentry in those days. His family, by contrast, became, and still remains, extremely wealthy. As the other noble families crumbled and fell around them, House Enokizu prospered more and more.

Nonetheless it would be wrong to assume that Enokizu had lived a free-wheeling life, showered with the blessings of his father's fortune. When the lord's children had grown, he had declared his obligations as their guardian to be finished, distributing his fortune to his sons the moment they were of age. Nor did the elder Enokizu allow his sons to take over the family business—an unbelievable decision in a time when Japan's hereditary system was so deeply ingrained.

So it was that, while he had inherited a sizable sum of money, Enokizu was more or less on his own.

Enokizu had one older brother, named Soichiro. He had taken his share of the fortune and started a jazz club and recreational facility targeting the occupation forces, which had turned out to be a great success. Clearly, he had inherited his father's business acumen.

Enokizu, however, seemed stuck with only his father's eccentricities, and for him things did not go quite so smoothly. Though he had advanced rapidly in the Army as an able young officer, after returning to civilian life nothing he did seemed to work out, and for the most part, he had squandered both his considerable academic reputation and his financial stability.

Not that he seemed to mind it in the least.

He was quite deft with his hands, and so for a while he had gotten by doing illustrations for magazines and advertisements, but none of these jobs had lasted for any length of time. Following that, he worked as a guitarist in his brother's jazz club, but soon rumors had begun to spread that he was one of those *après-guerre* hangers-on, and probably a Philopon* addict to boot. His usual detachment notwithstanding, Enokizu was shocked out of his rut by the whispered accusations, and so, with what was left of his portion of the inheritance, he had constructed a building and taken on tenants. This was about half a year ago, and since he had subsequently started his private eye business, it was hard to fault him for any recent lack of productivity.

I passed the window of the tailor's and stood for a moment in the entranceway. A brass plate hung by the door, boldly engraved with the words

*A variety of methamphetamine (speed).

"Enokizu Building." Inside, the heat was considerably less than out in the street. The wide railing that led up the concrete staircase was cool and pleasant to the touch. The only light on the stair came from small slits in the wall which kept out most of the direct sunlight. I felt almost refreshed by the time I made it to the third floor.

The door at the top of the stairs had a window of smoked glass. Written across it in gold lettering were the words *The Rose Cross Detective Agency*.

This was Enokizu's office. I had always thought that the name he chose for his business verged on the ridiculous; of course his work had nothing to do with the secret society of the Rose Cross—the Rosicrucians—that had pulled the strings in medieval Europe. He had settled on the name by mere happenstance. Just after he first decided to become a detective, he'd happened to run into Kyogokudo, who happened to be reading a translated book about the practice of magic in Europe, in which that name happened to come up. It had no greater meaning than that, but Enokizu had latched on to it immediately.

I opened the agency door, and a bell rang inside.

One of the guests' chairs just inside the entrance was currently occupied by Torakichi Yasukazu, who was lounging nonchalantly, drinking coffee.

"Oh, *sensei*, it's you! Come in, come in."

Torakichi was an easy-going lad, the son of a former employee of the Enokizu family. Apparently, years ago, the lord had seen some potential in the boy and had paid for his education through middle school, but study hadn't suited him, so halfway through he'd quit to become an apprentice to a door crafter. That hadn't suited him either, so he had then found a niche living with Enokizu and taking care of his personal affairs. The boy was good-natured enough, though his rampant curiosity could sometimes be unwelcome.

"Is the good detective in?"

"Oh, he's still in bed. Kibashu was here yesterday and they were at it till dawn." Torakichi made a drinking gesture with his hand.

"Old Kiba was here? That must have been something."

Kibashu was our name for Enokizu's old friend, Shutaro Kiba. Kiba was a proper detective with the Tokyo Police. He was also a war buddy of mine; we had seen combat in the same squad.

Kibashu was a notably gifted drinker. When he got together with Enokizu, who, it was generally agreed, drank like a thirsty ox, the party could go on for quite some time. I, whose fondness for liquid refreshment was slight by comparison, had never been able to keep up with them till the end, so I could only imagine in what state this morning would find them.

I sat down next to Torakichi and wiped my forehead with a handkerchief.

"Oh, it was quite the party last night," he was saying. "Boss got so excited he put his foot through the fan, as you can see." The remains of what must

have been an electric fan were piled in a corner of the room. "He picked a fine time, what with the heat."

"You are lucky to have had a fan while you did," I scoffed. "I sweat so much just sitting at home I've lost five pounds already this summer. You think he's awake?"

"I heard some knocking about in there, so I should expect so, but he hasn't shown his face yet. And we're expecting a customer any minute now! Actually, he gets mad when I wake him up, so you've come at just the right time, *sensei*. Think you could rouse him for me?"

Enokizu's foul morning moods were the stuff of legend. Still, I was intrigued by the mention of a supposed customer. It was certainly the first I'd heard of one in his half year of business.

"A customer, you say? You mean a client? Or is it the repairman come to fix your fan?"

"No, that fan's given up the ghost, I'm afraid. And yes, of course I mean a client. A proper lady, what's more. She just called, so I figure she'll be here within the hour. This is only our fourth client ever, so I'd hate to see him mess it up. He's just never been good with time." Torakichi sounded for all the world like a parent fretting over a wayward child.

As for me, I was a bit surprised. I was having trouble picturing actual people coming to this agency with actual requests. And to think three had already been here. It was a revelation—if it *was* true, I was going to be very interested to hear just what kind of clients had come to him with what sort of problems. The first thing to do, however, was wake our lazy detective.

Next to a tea table for greeting guests sat a large desk. A pyramid-shaped object sitting on the desk read:

PRIVATE

EYE

That the pyramid had been placed there in all seriousness was very much like Enokizu, and it cracked me up every time I saw it. Past that was a door to the back of the place and the detective's living space. I opened it up and went down the hall. When I knocked lightly on the bedroom door, a sound that was something between a baby's wail and the howling of some beast emerged from within, so I let myself inside. Enokizu was sitting cross-legged on his bed, looking over a mound of clothes piled before him.

"Eno, you up?"

"Oh, I'm up, I'm up," he replied, his gaze never wavering from the mountain of clothes.

I noticed that all he was wearing, other than a woman's bright red underkimono which hung suggestively off one shoulder, was a pair of under-shorts. He looked like the quintessential prodigal son, just arrived home from the pleasure quarters.

"Squatting on your bed in dishabille doesn't count as being 'up.' Kazutora's out there by himself, in a fix because you've got a client coming. Don't tell me you drank too much last night? I doubt any madam has you wrapped around her finger, so what's your excuse? What idiocy have you been up to?"

"You've quite a lot of nerve to barge into someone's bedroom and throw around accusations of idiocy, Seki."

Only Enokizu called me "Seki," shortening my surname, Sekiguchi. This was a relic of a system for making up nicknames that he and his classmates had favored back in school. It was because of them that I had always called Makio Fujino "Fujimaki," for that matter; and, though it wasn't practiced in my grade, for some reason I had been singled out to receive one of their special appellations too. It had started with my friend calling me Sekitatsu, but when I complained that this made me sound like some Edo Period fireman, he obliged me by getting rid of my given name altogether, and I became just "Seki" from then on. Enokizu hadn't limited his name-tweaking to his schoolmates, either; he'd also dubbed Torakichi Yasukazu and Shujiro Kiba "Kazutora" and "Kibashu" respectively. All in all I found this fondness for abbreviation rather silly, especially since some of the nicknames—Kibashu for Kiba, for example—were longer than their bearers' original surnames. Not that I was one to talk—after all, I called Enokizu by his nickname myself.

"In any case, Eno, I'm here about work, too—so maybe you can do something about your Oishi Kuranosuke* gone-out-to-the-brothels look, and we can get down to business?"

"You understand nothing, my dear Seki. If it were such an easy thing to determine what one was going to wear in the morning, I wouldn't have changed jobs anywhere near as often as I have."

"You mean to tell me you're having trouble getting dressed?"

He nodded forlornly. "I've been at it for two hours, and still nothing. Oh, it's easy being a writer. You can put on a dress shirt or a bathrobe and still claim to look like a novelist. But me, I'm a detective. You don't know how hard it is to dress so that people can take one look at you and know that."

I couldn't believe it. He was dead serious, of course. Whatever tension I'd felt after bursting into the room faded into hilarity.

"If people could tell you were a detective just by looking at you, how would you go about doing any detecting? Whatever happened to incognito? But if you really want to look the part, why not dress like Sherlock Holmes—get yourself a deerstalker hat and a pipe."

"Hey, not a bad idea." Enokizu immediately began searching through the mountain of clothes for a deerstalker hat, but slowly his frown returned. "Nothing here fits the bill," he sighed, without even glancing in my direction.

"Look, I realize you're busy, but I have something to tell you, and like it

*Leader of the 47 ronin in the play *Chushingura*, which concerns a vendetta.

or not I'm going to start." Not sure what else to do, still standing in the middle of the bedroom floor, I began describing my situation. I would have sat down, but Enokizu's room was so cluttered with all sorts of indescribable junk that I was afraid I would mistakenly sit on something valuable.

The whole time I was talking, Enokizu rummaged through his pile, looking alternately dazed and despondent. Only mention of the name "Fujimaki" warranted a brief glance in my direction. Other than that, he didn't so much as grunt, so that by the time I was finished I felt thoroughly ignored.

"E-Eno, could you just listen to me, please? I know we're old friends and all, but you are really pushing it."

"I'm listening," Enokizu said, looking straight at me then.

That sculpted, proportional face. Startlingly big eyes, tinged with auburn. Skin so pale he barely looked Asian. Hair the color of chestnuts when the sun shone through it. It was as if he had been born with fewer pigments than the rest of us.

He looks like one of those European porcelain dolls.

"In fact, you're the one who's acting distracted, Seki," he added after a moment. "Look—when I see a comely maiden staring dreamily off into space, I'm likely to start up a conversation with her, but when a thick-bearded man with a face like an ape is standing next to my bed with a moronic expression on his face, gaping at me, I'm more liable to deck him."

Enokizu's clenched fist hovering before my eyes snapped me out of my reverie. I had known him for years, and yet his face—like the crafted visage of a figurine—could still utterly distract me. I blinked. "Hey, it's your fault for not listening properly."

"I don't see how that would make *you* distracted."

"I wasn't distracted, just surprised when you turned around so quickly."

Why am I making excuses, anyway?

Somehow, at the first sign of a rift in any conversation with this man, I always found myself bending over backwards to smooth things over. I had a theory that Enokizu—and Kyogokudo for that matter—possessed some kind of numbing aura, a miasma to which I was particularly susceptible. They knew nothing about it, of course, and so to them, I merely appeared to be an idiot. When I walked out of range of the miasma, suddenly I was normal again, a productive member of society. But as soon as I came back, all my powers would suddenly fail me, and I'd find myself making excuses I didn't have to make.

"Okay, here's the problem," Enokizu explained. "Your facts are scrambled, your timeline is in shambles, and you're talking about it from five different points of view—how am I supposed to know what the point of the whole thing is? Why interrupt you with questions when I can listen to everything you have to say, make some internal sense of it, and then ask? I don't have to

look at you to listen, you know. It's not like I can close my *ears*—and with you standing so close and ranting on like that, frankly, I'd hear you if I wanted to or not."

Having finally decided on a shirt, he stuck his arm through a sleeve.

"It was a difficult story—I wasn't sure where to begin," I protested. "Besides, it's common courtesy to at least acknowledge that you're being talked to."

"What's so difficult about it? You really *are* a monkey, aren't you? You want acknowledgment? Fine. Fujimaki married into a medical family and then disappeared from a locked room. At the time, his wife was three months pregnant, and even though he's been gone a year and a half now she *still* hasn't given birth. Naturally, all sorts of rumors have sprung up about this; Atsu went down to report on it, turned to you for advice, and since you couldn't give her any, you went to talk to Kyogokudo, and he recommended that you come here—that's all you had to say. It didn't even take me thirty seconds."

"But that's just the conclusion. A lot of stuff happened on the way."

"If I understand the conclusion on its own, I won't need the details. It's inefficient. If there was something I wasn't sure about, I'd ask you," Enokizu stated matter-of-factly, rendering all my bluster meaningless. He squinted at me while tying on a necktie. "So what was the name of this clinic? Ijuin, was it? Or Kumamoto?"

Enokizu was somewhat famous in our circle for his inability to remember names—though he was usually closer than that.

"Kuonji. You *weren't* listening, were you?"

Enokizu burst out laughing—a high-pitched, rapid-fire sound—and then called out, "Kazutora! Kazutora!"

As I stood there dumbfounded, Torakichi hurriedly opened the door.

"Something wrong?"

"No, I was just wondering, what's the name of our guest who's coming? Kuno, was it? Or Yakushiji...?"

Torakichi rolled his eyes and shook his head. He looked at me almost pleadingly before returning an accusatory gaze to Enokizu. "It's *Kuonji*. Please don't get it wrong when she's here."

Before, I had been dumbfounded. Now I was in shock.

"See, Seki? It's fate! Boy, I'm glad you're here. I was worried about what sort of case a doctor with an odd name like that would be foisting onto me. They'd said something about a missing person, which, I'll admit, didn't especially pique my interest. But now the mystery is resolved! Our lady guest will doubtlessly ask me to discover where her dear Fujimaki has gone! Now Seki..." Enokizu paused to make a second attempt at tying his necktie. "I

think you should be the one to talk to her—you clearly know far more about the situation than I do. What do you think, care to be detective for a day?"

"What are you talking about!? *You're* the detective, I'm the writer."

"Why, my dear Seki, that doesn't matter in the least. It only makes sense that the one with more background information should talk to her. The chat will go far more smoothly that way, I assure you."

"She's not coming here to chat! This is serious, Eno. If you'd just listen—"

"Well there's no time for that now, is there, Seki old chap? Our guest will be arriving any moment. And I am quite pantless. You might not look much like a detective, but at least you're dressed well enough. Ah, and you may have a bit of the simian in your features, but that's hardly something we can do anything about. Anyhow you, you alone, are quite well informed in the particulars of the matter which our client will doubtless lay at our feet. Even a baying mongrel in the street would know you're the better choice to greet her."

"Monkeys, dogs—what is it with you?" I growled as Enokizu undid the necktie he'd just put on. His logic was forced at best, but I had to admit, this entirely unexpected opportunity to meet someone directly involved with the affair was no small temptation. Nonetheless I continued my protestation.

"I'm no detective, Eno! I don't know the first thing about running an investigation."

"Oh, the police will do all the investigating. They're good at that. Better than I am, at any rate."

In truth, I'd always had a hard time picturing Enokizu carrying out any sort of proper forensic inquiry. The whole reason he had started the detective business in the first place was to cash in on his remarkable intuition.

It was something he had discovered the year before—when he was playing guitar in his brother's club, I think. People would ask him about missing objects, or missing people, and he would tell them where they could find them. He wouldn't ask around, or question them, he would just sit there and make up an answer, and his accuracy was at least as good as that of most fortune-tellers or psychics.

This talent had led him to his current profession. It had nothing to do with crime scenes or deductive reasoning. It was, in fact, a sham. And yet—

"So, you'll go out there," said Enokizu, grinning, "and when her story reaches its climax, I'll come dashing out and solve the case. All you have to do is sit there and listen to her. Nothing to worry about. Let's see," Enokizu put a finger to his chin, "I know. You can be Mr. Seki, my gifted assistant. Kazutora, please introduce him as such when the lady arrives."

Enokizu nodded to himself, satisfied, and removed his necktie a third time. Apparently, the tying wasn't going so well. Torakichi and I both stood for a while with our mouths agape, but we were soon pushed out of the room.

Enokizu would rather die, he told us, than have two grown men watch him get dressed.

So, still not sure exactly why or even how it had happened, I found myself taking on the role of the detective's assistant.

This is what they mean when they talk about an unexpected turn of events.

I wandered into the office, and sat down on the low couch next to the coffee table.

"The boss can't stand listening to clients ramble on and on," Torakichi explained with a hint of exasperation as he poured me a cup of tea.

"And yet he's running this business? How can you be a detective if you don't listen to what people are saying?"

"I don't know myself, but he can. Our first client—he comes in, and before he says a thing, the boss knows why he's there, and what to do about his case. He was right too, which was good, but the client got all suspicious, naturally, accusing us of snooping on him and all."

"I can imagine."

"So the next client, he tried to listen to them a bit first. But they were only halfway done when he got bored and couldn't stand it anymore."

"...He solved the case?"

"On the spot. They had two problems, and his answer to the first was a little off, so that was easy enough to explain, but the other one he hit right on the money."

"Not bad. It's not everyone who can do good detective work from the comfort of their own couch."

"No, it is bad. He solved the case, but the clients weren't happy. They wanted to know how he knew things he couldn't possibly know, and in the end, the boss became a suspect. The police even came to question him!" Torakichi sighed deeply. "If Kiba hadn't stepped in and bailed us out, I don't know what would've happened. And this is the police we're talking about. Most people, you tell them things you're not supposed to know, they get frightened or angry or worse. Say, do you have any idea how he knows all this stuff? Is he some kind of psychic?"

Good question.

It was something I'd often wondered myself.

Kyogokudo knew the answer, or at least he purported to, but I'd never bothered to ask him, guessing that his explanation would be incomprehensible to me. When Enokizu first stated he was going to become a detective, practically everyone told him he should be a fortune-teller instead—everyone but Kyogokudo.

Enokizu couldn't tell fortunes. He makes too many mistakes.

So it was with Kyogokudo's blessing that Eno ended up in his current

position. He couldn't have been happier. It seemed that his "inspiration" was a selective thing. He could only "see" things in the past; the information that came to him was limited to facts and events. Human emotions and future happenings were beyond his ken, apparently.

A quarter of an hour passed as I waited in the office.

My nerves made every minute feel like an eternity.

My curiosity to meet the woman from Kuonji Clinic and my anxious wish that Enokizu would hurry up and come out of his room mounted inside me, each vying for top position. If either of them—the guest or Enokizu—had put in an appearance, it would have broken the uncomfortable spell that held me, but all that emerged from my friend's room was an occasional curious yelp or whine. There was no sign that the man himself had any intention of showing his face.

Ding!

The bell on the door rang.

I shot up from my chair and faced the doorway, gazing at the woman who had just come in.

Pale face, fine features.

She's beautiful.

Her kimono, a delicate weave of indigo, so dark it could almost have been mistaken for mourning clothes. A white parasol floating in her hand. She seemed composed entirely of dark and light, an image seared onto a photographic plate.

Her neck, so thin it looked like it might snap at any moment. Her face, as delicately carved as a wooden doll's. Perfect eyebrows accenting her eyes. Perhaps it was due to the lack of makeup, or the reflection from her dark clothes, but her face looked paler than it should have, as if she were—yes, she looked like a corpse.

For the briefest of moments, a wrinkle formed between her eyebrows, almost as if she were in pain.

Then, her gaze drifting, and her movements shadowed with unease, she bowed politely. Her every motion was slow, deliberate. A single strand of her tightly bound hair loosed itself and slipped down across her face.

"I beg your pardon. Is this the office of Mr. Enokizu?"

So great was the shock of seeing her arrive that for a few moments neither I nor Torakichi could speak; to her our lack of response must have suggested that she had come to the wrong place. She tilted her head as if uncertain, and asked again.

"I was looking for the detective, Mr. Enokizu. Is this—"

"It is! You're here!" Torakichi practically shouted, jerking from his chair

like a wooden wind-up toy sprung suddenly to life. "M-Miss Kuonji, yes? Please, have a seat." He motioned toward the chair across from me while I remained sitting quietly, still unable to fully grasp the situation.

She bowed her head again politely as she took a seat, but my attention was so intensely focused on her face that I didn't immediately comprehend that her courteous gesture was meant for me. I was terrified, reluctant to let my gaze wander below her chest; I lacked the courage to see whether or not she was pregnant.

At last, fearfully, I lowered my eyes toward that which I must not see, the subject of all those horrible rumors. And my expectations were utterly betrayed. The woman before me was untouched, pure, free of any swelling or deformity.

Of course she's not pregnant.

If I'd only thought about it, it would have been obvious. Even if a woman twenty months pregnant really existed, she certainly wouldn't have made the lengthy trip to Enokizu's office by herself. Most likely, she wouldn't even venture out of her house.

"The detective's just had an urgent matter come up," Torakichi said rapidly. "He's taking care of it as fast as he can. This here's the detective's able assistant Mr. Seki. He'll listen to your case, so please tell him everything you would have told the detective." Torakichi offered the woman a cup of tea and sat down beside me.

Having been so politely introduced as per Enokizu's instructions, there was nothing for me to do but accept my new identity.

"I'm...Seki."

The woman smiled faintly then, and bowed her head for the third time. "My name is Ryoko Kuonji. Thank you for agreeing to hear my request. I'm afraid it will not be an easy one, but I beg your understanding."

Once again she bowed her head, deeply.

At last, I remembered to bow my head in response. It occurred to me that she had already bowed several times and I had entirely ignored her—not because I wasn't paying attention, but because I was in shock. She must have thought me insufferably rude. I felt the color drain from my face.

In such close quarters, the woman Ryoko Kuonji was truly stunning. There was a dangerous tension to her smooth skin and the slightly troubled expression on her face that only made her more beautiful—it was as if all her will was focused on maintaining a precarious perfection. She could have suddenly burst out laughing and still would have been attractive, but anything so mundane as a laugh would surely have upset the balance, and the unsettling beauty that she now displayed would have faded and been lost.

"Let's hear this request, then," Torakichi said suddenly, giving me a light jab in the ribs. I had been lost, staring at her face again.

"As I'm sure you know, my family practices medicine in Zoshigaya—in Toshima Ward, by the bay."

"Actually, I did know, though I didn't hear it from your family. That is, I'd heard the, well, the rumors."

I have never been very good at speaking with strangers, and I could feel myself faltering under the tremendous pressure of the moment. On reflection, it would have been wiser to have held my tongue rather than say something I might regret, but I was feeling a peculiar sort of obligation to act like a detective, which in my case meant opening my mouth and saying the first thing that sprang to mind.

"Ah..." Ryoko Kuonji sounded despondent. "Bad rumors, yes?"

Torakichi shot me an incredulous look, and secretly jabbed me again in the ribs.

"Y-Yes, bad rumors. But, seeing you, ma'am, I am reassured that these stories are nothing but nonsense. Though little can be said about your husband's disappearance, upon seeing you, I would have to say that the rumors—no, let us call them slanders—I see that there is nothing to support them at all. They are baseless accusations of the worst kind." It was all I could do to keep from collapsing in a nervous heap. I couldn't believe I was saying such things to a woman whom I had just met, let alone someone in her position.

Silence hung in the room for a moment. Ryoko Kuonji's eyes were downcast, her expression one of long-endured pain; but when she spoke again her words were controlled and unhurried. "I did not realize the rumors had spread so far. From what you have said, I see that you're well aware of our family's situation, Mr. Seki—"

"Aware of the rumors, yes," I blurted, "but as I just said I do not believe them. Having met you, I would have to say that believing such slander would be quite impossible."

"Mr. Seki, I'm afraid you have misunderstood. I do not know precisely what rumors you have heard, but I fear they are more true than you think."

"Eh?"

What is she saying?

Could those outrageous stories—slander too malicious to print—really be true?

"My sister, Kyoko Kuonji, has been pregnant now for twenty months, and shows no sign of giving birth. Perhaps this is what you have heard—what you seem to be having such difficulty discussing? That, and Kyoko's husband Makio has, as they are saying, vanished without a trace."

My ears felt like they were on fire. I was sure my face was red, like a drunk after a binge. Fear of people, uncontrollable blushing, an awkwardness

of speech—these were some of my most basic traits, and now they were on parade in full force. *Of course*, I realized belatedly, *the client wouldn't be someone directly involved in the case*. No—it made far more sense for a family member to come on the troubled person's behalf. How much I longed at that instant for Enokizu to come dashing gallantly out and, with his psychic magical powers, solve the case just like that.

There was no sign of the detective, however. I thought grimly that he'd had enough time to put on fifty pairs of pants by now.

"The Kuonji family name has passed down a line of women. Both my grandfather and my father took on the name when they married into our family. And like my grandfather, my father bore no sons, leaving only myself and my sister."

The woman's voice came to me as if from across a vast distance, gradually becoming clearer and more distinct. I had been staring at the flat surface of the table between us, and now, I hesitantly lifted my gaze.

"It is my shame," the woman was saying, "but from a young age I was always a sickly and—" Her words broke off. She looked to be in terrible pain, as if she might collapse at any moment. "I cannot—will not—ever bear a child. Thus it fell to my sister to take a husband that there might be an heir."

"Then I'm afraid I have been terribly rude. I must—"

"No, please, you are not to blame. Why, I will soon be twenty-eight years of age. Surely no one would expect me to be unwed."

What kind of worthless idiot was I? What damage had my misunderstanding wrought? Because of me, this poor woman had been forced to reveal the painful burden of her barrenness. And that wasn't all. I had gone on to drive an unwed maiden to reveal to me her age.

"Ah..." Ryoko Kuonji made as if to say something more; then a look of astonishing loneliness came over her features, and she apologized for speaking of her personal matters. Her hands, resting upon her knees, clasped each other tightly. Her fingers were slender as spring twigs. She was so thin, I would have expected her cheeks to be hollowed and her eyes sunken. But her face, with her brow wrinkled in delicate consternation, showed no signs of illness. Rather, she possessed an almost childlike quality, as if she had, at some point earlier in life, simply ceased to age. She certainly didn't look twenty-eight. If she had let down her bangs, she could easily have passed for a girl of seventeen or eighteen.

"No, it was wrong of me to make such assumptions. You, you really do not look your age, miss. If I saw you in the street, I might think you a teenager."

Again, I had said the first thing that sprang to mind, and after I said it, I was immediately gripped by embarrassment and regretted I had spoken at all. Miss Kuonji was looking down at the floor again, and Torakichi was glaring

at me with a look of disdain—no, humiliation—that screamed *get on with it*.

I felt a strong urge to give it all up, throw my hands into the air, and flee.

But then, to my complete surprise, Ryoko Kuonji began to laugh. When she looked up, her eyes shone brightly.

"I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't laugh, it's hardly appropriate. But—you are a strange man. I spent the whole way here agonizing about how I was ever going to speak of this shame upon my family, but you...you have freed me." She gave a sad little smile.

Even with that encouragement, it took me quite some time before I could swallow my shyness and meet her gaze.

Ryoko's story, for the most part, agreed with what I already knew. What I learned was that Fujimaki's relations with his wife had been strained before his disappearance, and that the night he'd vanished there had been a rather severe argument between them. The image of Fujimaki I carried around in my mind was not of someone who would ever engage in squabbles with his wife, so this revelation came as some surprise. However, I had never been that close to the man, and the affairs of a husband and wife are often inscrutable to others, so I had no reason to doubt what she told me.

Of course, I hadn't told her that the missing man, her brother-in-law, was an old acquaintance of mine. It was, after all, a matter of pure coincidence, and there was nothing to be gained by giving her cause for suspicion—nor had a good opportunity to mention it arisen.

"Was there some cause for the friction between them?"

"Well, it is only a rumor, but apparently Makio wrongly suspected her."

"Suspected her of what?"

"He suspected that there was another man—that Kyoko, my sister, had—"

"An affair?" Torakichi blurted suddenly, as if he had been biding his time and we had finally gotten to something he understood.

"Was there any truth to it?" I asked, cutting him off. I wanted to avoid the discussion from getting overly casual. She had just begun to get comfortable and talk freely and I didn't want to risk anything making her withdraw.

"None—at least, that is what my sister swears."

It was an answer that left much to the imagination.

"So Makio had no basis at all to suspect your sister?"

"I don't know if it counts as a basis, but there were circumstances that might have led him to think something was amiss." Ryoko Kuonji's eyes wandered around the room for a moment, then, looking a bit bewildered, she continued. "There is an apprentice doctor who lives at the clinic by the name of Naito. My mother had noticed his ability from a young age, and not a few had assumed that he would be the one who would marry into the family and carry on the Kuonji name."

"Ah!" Torakichi interjected. "And then along comes Makio, and poor Naito finds his future snatched from his hands, but the snatcher was still jealous, so he—"

I stomped on Torakichi's foot. "So, Makio suspected your sister of having a relationship with this Dr. Naito?"

"Yes. In fact, Naito himself had suggested many times that he was disgruntled by the way things turned out. Though I can't see what he would have had to gain by...seeing my sister. Rather, if they'd been discovered, he would have most definitely been barred from the clinic. So you see—"

"There can be no truth to it," I finished for her.

"I don't see how there could be."

"Yeah, but jealousy's a tricky thing," Torakichi pointed out, leaning forward casually. "It's the smart, serious ones that get it the worst. Too bad for your sister, having to go through that—"

I glared daggers at him out of the corners of my eyes, then turned back to our client. "So, about the day that Makio vanished. Could you be more specific about the circumstances—do you know anything more about what went on that day?"

"I was out of town, so I witnessed nothing myself, but it seems there had been a rather loud fight the night before; and near dawn, Makio shut himself in the room and locked the doors."

"So there's a lock on every room in the place?" Torakichi asked. His tone was growing more familiar with each question, and I felt a pang of distress.

But Miss Kuonji ignored him. "When morning came, he didn't come out," she continued. "My sister was worried, of course. She talked to our father, who said Makio was sure to reappear sooner or later, and that they should leave him alone—so they did. Morning turned into noon and then into evening, and my sister became increasingly upset, beating on the door and calling out to him."

"There was no window? No way you could have looked in?"

"None. The room had originally been used to treat patients. It was part of the hospital facilities—that is, until we lost half of the building in the air raids. Since the war, we'd been using it as a library. That particular room has two doors, both locked from the inside."

"What did your sister do then?"

"Well, someone gave her the idea that maybe he had hung himself in there. She couldn't take it any longer and asked Naito and one of our workers to break the hinges on the door. That's how they got it open."

"And he wasn't inside?"

"He was not."

"Couldn't he have gotten out somehow, maybe when everyone was sleeping?"

"The door they broke through opens into the bedroom where my sister sleeps. That is, where she normally sleeps. That night she was too excited to doze off even once, so he couldn't have come out that way. The other door from the room just goes into an auxiliary room—a very cramped space with no windows, like a darkroom. And there's no way out from there. In any case, the main room was locked from the inside. Even if he *had* found some way to get out, how could he have locked the doors behind him? And, even if he had some way of doing that, why would he?"

Miss Kuonji's brow furrowed and she looked at me with pain in her eyes. I wished I had an answer for her, but in all honesty, I was utterly baffled.

"Regardless of what happened, or how, my brother-in-law Makio hasn't been seen since then. The shock of his disappearance laid my sister in bed, and before long her pregnancy was discovered. Now, a year and a half later, my sister is *still* abed. Wicked rumors are spreading further every day, and I can't begin to count how many patients we've lost, not to mention nursing staff."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said lamely.

"But—I'm sure these things will work themselves out in due time," she continued. "The reason why I am here today is that I fear the Kuonji household—my family—may be breaking apart."

Her need for something to cling to showed clear in her face. Yet she didn't cry. It looked to me as if she were gritting her teeth against some internal pain.

"All rumors pass with time," she said after a pause. "People can say the most heartless things they want, yet as long as the family holds tight, we can weather any storm. But when we begin to doubt one another, I fear—I fear this may be the end."

"What kind of doubts are you talking about? Is there something specific?"

"My father suspects my sister and Naito. He thinks they made some agreement—that they conspired to kill Makio. And my mother, she thinks Makio is still alive somewhere, casting a spell on my sister, cursing her. This has horribly upset my sister, and her way of rebelling against them is to refuse any kind of real treatment for her condition. Because of this, she grows weaker by the day..."

"Ma'am, I understand," I said, nodding firmly. It was almost more than I could bear to watch her recount her story. "It would be unkind to press you any further. I think, as a next step, we should meet directly with your family." Enokizu still showed no signs of arriving, and I felt I had reached the limit of my abilities to handle the situation. I thought it best to stop for the day at this point. Later, I could talk to Enokizu about a way to approach this bizarre, mysterious case and get on the road toward some kind of resolution. At any rate, I felt like I would be torturing her if I went on in this fashion. "Perhaps

the detective and I could pay a visit to your home tomorrow?"

I had no idea how Private Eye Enokizu, who by all accounts practiced neither investigation nor deduction, would react to my decision, but I didn't care. It was his fault for not even showing his face when the client was right here at his office.

"You mean you'll take the case?"

"You want us to find out where Makio is, correct?"

"No—more than find him; I want to know if he's alive, or dead; and if he is alive, why did he run? That is all I wish to know. It's no concern of mine where he is, or what he's doing now. I just need to know what happened to him in order to mend this wound that's run through my family.

"And I'll need proof of whatever you find."

"Would you still want that proof, even if it were something that would, beyond a shadow of a doubt, deepen your family's wound?" a voice asked from right behind my head. Startled, I shrank down and looked over my shoulder.

Enokizu was standing just in front of the folding screen that was set up behind the couch.

His face was serious, for once. As he stared at Ryoko Kuonji his mouth straightened in a sober line.

He looked like a Greek sculpture.

For her part, Miss Kuonji did not seem startled in the least by the detective's sudden appearance. She sat resolutely, returning Enokizu's gaze; her eyes, like those of a Noh mask, offered no hint at the thoughts behind them.

Stuck there between the two of them, I had the curious sensation that I was caught among figures in a wax museum.

"And what should I take that to mean?" she asked him at last.

"I mean what I said."

The wax figures were conversing in a tongue only they understood.

"I trust my family."

"Is Makio not a part of your family?"

For some reason beyond my fathoming, for a brief moment, Ryoko Kuonji's troubled expression smoothed into a faint smile.

"Not anymore, I should think."

Then the wax figures were still again, returned to their inorganic state.

"What's all this, Eno? When did you come out, anyway?" I twisted around in my seat to address my friend. But Enokizu did not respond, his gaze never wavering from Miss Kuonji—or rather, a spot two or three inches in the air above her head.

"I have only two questions," the detective said suddenly. The hapless, vaguely idiotic tone of voice that I had heard in his room was gone, replaced

by something settled and severe. "Whose idea was it to come to me with this case?"

"Mine. A friend of mine—an interpreter for the occupation forces—heard good things about you."

"Ah," Enokizu frowned. This news seemed to have startled him. "One more thing, then. Have you been lying?"

"What are you—how rude!" My words tumbled out in exasperation. "This is our *client* you're talking to. Why would she lie? If you ask me, she's been very frank and has said some very difficult things about her family. Isn't it clear she wants to solve this case?"

"Seki," Enokizu said calmly, "she has not asked us to solve any case. She merely says she wants some proof."

"Same thing!" I insisted, my anger rising. But when I turned back to the woman, looking for some support, she seemed entirely unruffled, nor did she deny the detective's wild accusation. Rather she seemed even calmer than before.

"Do you find something suspect in what I have said here?" she asked coolly.

"No. It just occurred to me that you've known this man here before today."

What man? Me? I don't know her. How could I?

"Eno, have you gone completely mad?" I demanded. "There's wild accusations, and then there's wild accusations. I've just met her for the first time! What, you suspect me, too?"

"No, but you're forgetful. I can't trust your memory." He turned back to the woman. "Well? You know Seki, don't you?"

This time her denial was swift and firm. "I'm sorry, but I do not. I'm afraid you must be mistaken."

"I see. Very well," Enokizu replied, and with that he turned, went into his room, and closed the door.

Ignoring Torakichi, who sat there with his mouth agape, I began to apologize profusely to our new client. It was hard to explain the detective's bizarre conduct in any way that would make it seem forgivable. Nor could I begin to comprehend how she'd taken it.

I bumbled on for a few moments. Then, unexpectedly, Miss Kuonji put both her hands on mine to quiet me, then lifted her downcast eyes. Her face was still troubled, yet, strangely, she was smiling. "Please, don't let it bother you. My friend warned me of Mr. Enokizu's unconventional methods. I'm sure what he just did was very important to his investigation. It was a bit surprising, yes, but I'm hardly in a position to complain."

That's crazy. She doesn't seem shocked at all. Why isn't she?

My mind still spinning, I promised her that I would be at the Kuonji Clinic by one o'clock in the afternoon on the following day. She gave me the address and directions for how to reach it, then she bowed her head in farewell. "I will be waiting. Thank you very much for hearing my case."

Politely excusing herself, Miss Kuonji exited the office.

Clang, rang the doorbell.

The faint air of loneliness that had hung about Ryoko Kuonji lingered on after she left, as if she had left a mournful aura around the sofa and the doorway where she'd stood. For a while we simply waited, lost in that fading impression.

At last Torakichi, who had been standing like an idiot with his mouth half-open ever since Enokizu's surprise appearance, suddenly sprang back to life.

"Well, well, well. That was, by far, the most beautiful person I have ever met. Don't get me wrong, I've seen my share of gals. Why, the old bookseller's wife is a beauty herself... Oh, and your wife's pretty good-looking too."

"The old bookseller" was his usual appellation for Kyogokudo, though I could never figure out whether he was calling my friend old, or referring to the fact that he sold old books.

"There's no need for flattery. I wouldn't drag Kyogokudo's wife out for comparison—let alone mine."

"Oh, no flattery intended. But that Miss Kuonji, she's a rare breed. Like someone from...from another world! Wearing a kimono when it's hot as hell outside and not even breaking a sweat! Hey, do you think people who look that great learn how not to sweat, too?"

"Now that you mention it—she wasn't sweating, was she?"

I hadn't noticed.

"And she was skinny as a rail, but still had quite the bod, huh? Seems a shame to wrap it all up like that."

I hadn't noticed that, either.

For some reason, I hadn't seen her in that way; my mind just hadn't strayed into the same territory as Torakichi's. Maybe it was because I felt I *shouldn't* think that way. "Torakichi, is that all you look at when you see a woman? You're worse than I thought. And speaking of rudeness, what's up with our detective? He came gallantly dashing out, as promised, but I'm not sure what the hell happened next." Not wishing to discuss the woman any further, I shifted the conversation toward Enokizu.

Torakichi started to say something, but I ignored him as I marched up to Enokizu's door. "Eno!" I shouted. "What was that all about? Explain yourself!"

There was no answer.

Undaunted, I barged into the next room.

Enokizu was standing by the window, gazing down at the view outside. For someone as manic as he was, he looked almost dejected. Maybe he was having regrets about what he'd said. The wind went out of my sails, and I found it impossible to chew him out as I'd intended. After a long hesitation I simply said, in a small voice, "Would you mind doing things properly tomorrow? Please?"

"Do what?"

"Your job. That, just now... That was too cruel."

"You really don't remember her?"

"Huh?"

Enokizu shook his head and muttered, half to himself, "Yeah. Dead. Definitely dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Fujimaki, that's who. And she should know it, too."

"Why do you suspect her of anything? I know I'm no detective, but I've been around the block enough to see that she wasn't lying."

"Maybe so—she could have simply forgotten."

Enokizu fell silent.

Unsure of how to handle my peculiar friend, and at a loss for ideas, I turned and left the room. Then, after forcing a reluctant Torakichi to promise to make sure Enokizu was on time the next day, I took my leave of the detective agency, uncertainty clouding my thoughts.

My head was scattered, and my heart with it. I decided to pay another visit to Kyogokudo to report on the events of the day. After all, he was the one who had sent me to the agency in the first place; maybe he would understand what had transpired.

By the time I got off the train, the sun was already low in the sky, and the air was almost cool. There was a wind this evening as there had not been the night before. With my mind still troubled I began the long walk up that lackadaisical slope.

The bookshop had already closed its doors for the day. I called out a few times, but as there was no reply, I went around to the private entrance in back. It seemed someone was in, so I opened the door and spotted a pair of women's shoes next to the bookseller's wooden sandals. *His wife must be home*. I could hear snatches of Kyogokudo's voice coming from the living room. *And he's home too*. Figuring it wouldn't be a problem, I let myself in.

"Hey, Kyogokudo. It's me. Sorry to barge in—"

I slid open the *shoji* screen, and a woman who was not his wife turned to look at me. It was his sister, Atsuko Chuzenji.

"Mr. Sekiguchi! This is a surprise."

Her eyes opened wide and she turned with catlike poise to face me. Unlike her sedentary brother, Atsuko was always animated, her every movement swift and crisp. When she was little she had worn her bangs cut straight across like a Japanese doll's, but once she started working she had lopped them off; and since she rarely wore skirts, these days she often had rather a boyish look.

"Oh, it's you, Atsuko. I thought Chizuko must be home."

"Watch it. I'll not have you confusing this braying mare with my Chizuko," Kyogokudo asserted, looking as dour as always. "They couldn't be more different."

Atsuko lifted an exasperated eyebrow as she glared at her brother. Though their faces bore no resemblance, some of their expressions were exactly the same.

"Fancy calling your dearest sister such things, when I've come all this way to make supper for you—you, who can't even brew a cup of tea when your wife is away."

"Who asked you to come? And who'd want to eat something you had made, anyhow? I *can* make my own tea, and quite well, thank you very much. Why, I made some for the esteemed *sensei* here just the other day."

"Yes," I put in, "though as I recall it was more akin to hot water than tea." Atsuko Chuzenji laughed merrily. "Speaking of which, where is Chizuko, anyway? Don't tell me she finally despaired of her book-addicted husband and left for good?"

"I'd think your Yukie would be first to run for the hills. And I'll have you know that, among used booksellers, I'm considered quite a devoted husband."

"And yet to society at large you are merely a devoted reader," I said, sparing as I sat down in my customary spot, exactly where I'd sat the day before.

"My sister-in-law is at her home in Kyoto," Atsuko said, still laughing, "for the Gion festival."

"Oh, right." No doubt this was the festival my wife had mentioned that morning.

"Apparently the annual festivities over there took a downturn right after the war broke out, but it's fully recovered now. With every neighborhood entering a float, they need all the hands they can get," Kyogokudo explained. Then his expression shifted to that eyebrow-raised glare his sister had used a few moments earlier, and he eyed me suspiciously. "And to what do we owe the honor of your visit at this late hour? From the looks of it, you must've run straight up the hill. You're practically out of breath."

"Right, well, I went to our friend the detective's place today, as you recommended."

"About the Kuonji Clinic case?"

It was only after I had spoken that I realized that this could be an awkward topic with Atsuko sitting right there. I had completely forgotten that it was she who had turned down the story on moral grounds. Now, recalling the dressing-down she had given her boss, Nakamura, I fumbled for the next thing to say. I began to wonder how many times in one day a man could be at a loss for words.

"It's okay, Sekiguchi," Kyogokudo said, coming to my rescue. "I explained the whole situation to her a moment ago. It's this tomboy's fault for bringing the story to you in the first place, anyway—though I hear she ended up dropping it. So, what did our eccentric detective friend have to say?"

Thus saved from my momentary aphasia, I told them what had gone on at the detective agency from start to finish. While I spoke, Kyogokudo sat silent and still as a stone statue, but his sister listened enthusiastically, so I was able to tell my story without suffering the sense of alienation I had felt earlier while speaking to Enokizu.

It occurred to me that, for two days, I had done nothing but deal with this case in one form or another. The more I talked about it, the more I'd given in to the delusion that it was not something that had happened to other people, but something that directly involved me.

"Hmph," Kyogokudo interrupted. "So you have feelings for this woman?"

I blinked. "Huh? Why do you say that? Sure, she was pretty, but I've hardly become some love-struck admirer from afar."

"Oh, I didn't think you were quite as foolish as that. It's just that when you started talking about Miss Kuonji, your descriptions got rather...vague, or literary, shall we say, as if there were some hidden truth there under the surface. It was embarrassing, really. Like hearing an ineptly written love letter being read aloud."

Atsuko immediately chastised her brother for always being so negative. "...Besides, Mr. Sekiguchi is a writer, after all. Why wouldn't he use poetry to describe something beautiful? Isn't that right, *sensei*?"

The same feeling of overpowering shame I had felt when sitting across from Ryoko Kuonji rose up suddenly inside me again, twisting my tongue and rendering me unable to properly respond to Atsuko's compliment.

"Whatever," Kyogokudo grunted. "Be that as it may, what did Enokizu say when it was all over?"

I breathed an inward sigh of relief that the subject had turned away from Miss Kuonji. "He muttered something about him being dead—Fujimaki, that is. And he repeated his claim that I had met Miss Kuonji before."

Kyogokudo scratched his head, putting on his harried writer's face. "So it seems this woman saw Fujimaki's corpse, or Fujimaki looking awfully like a corpse. But, if we trust your experience in these matters and we believe she's telling the truth, then she must have completely forgotten about it—not to

mention forgetting about seeing you sometime in the past."

"What are you talking about? Now you've completely lost me. How could you, or he, possibly know such things? I certainly don't know the woman; and if she *did* see some corpse, she'd have gone to the police, not to a detective. I thought you were too much of a man of reason to put so much stock in Enokizu's wild conjecturing."

"There you go again, getting all riled up at mention of this Kuonji. Why couldn't she have forgotten you, if you did meet in the past? And if she saw something *like* a corpse, but knew it wasn't *actually* a corpse, she could well have forgotten about that too. Or she could have seen something that resembled a corpse and not even realized it—in which case she surely wouldn't connect it to any mysterious disappearance, would she?"

My head was starting to swim. "Look, what I want to know is, how would Enokizu know something that neither I nor Miss Kuonji—the very people supposedly involved—can remember? Either he's just making it up, or he's pulling one of those psychic tricks you so despise."

I realized abruptly that somewhere in this conversation I had gone on the offensive. My usual reclusive self was watching from an inner corner, giving my loud, aggressive self a chilly look.

Maybe I *had* developed special feelings for Ryoko Kuonji, as Kyogokudo suggested. But whatever they were, they had nothing to do with love or sex or anything else one thinks of as transpiring between a man and a woman. In fact as I pondered it then I felt that something growing inside me was preventing me from having feelings of that sort, as if they were taboo when it came to her.

As my mind spun, the discussion continued around me. "Yeah," Atsuko said, rallying to my side. "I'm interested in hearing an explanation, too. How does Enokizu know these things?"

"Cause his eyes are bad. He can see people's memories."

"What?" Atsuko and I raised our voices in unison.

"Come on, Kyogokudo! Tell me in a way I'll understand, just this once. What is he, a mind reader? A psychic, with clairvoyance or whatever you call it? What does that have to do with his eyes being bad?"

"Sekiguchi. Have you forgotten everything we discussed yesterday?"

"How could I forget?"

The bookseller shook his head and muttered something under his breath. He got up from his cushion, fidgeted about for a moment, and then sat back down, giving the impression that explaining himself would be the most onerous task he'd ever been asked to carry out. "How could I forget?" you say, all proud of yourself—but then you go and bring up something as vapid and beside the point as mind reading?

"Look—for what it's worth, when I talked to you yesterday, I avoided all

technical jargon and difficult terms to make it easy for you to understand. I summarized, and spared you some of the more convoluted reasoning; I made a few big leaps for simplicity's sake, and added lots of emphasis, and even threw in a bit of joviality and small talk, all with plenty of examples for you to sink your teeth into. And didn't you tell me how you understood the important parts? But if you're going to go on now about psychics and E.S.P.—if you're not willing to free yourself from that mode of thought entirely—then I was wasting my time talking to you in the first place."

Maybe he was right. The day before, on my way down the hill afterward, I hadn't been able to remember one thing about our conversation clearly. Still, here I was, off to do detective work with Enokizu on the morrow. If there was some method to his madness, some meaning to his seemingly random actions, I'd better do what I could to find out about it.

"You make good speeches, Kyogokudo, but not a whole lot of sense. It's all very well to claim our friend 'sees memories' or what have you, but the moment Atsuko or I call you on it, you stammer something about it being my fault for not understanding. Maybe we're the ones with the point, and you're just making things up."

I knew, of course, that this wasn't true. However he had arrived at a given point of view, Kyogokudo would never utter the first word of any theory with an internal contradiction you could actually point to. In the long years of our acquaintance, I had never once seen my friend lose an argument or start following a chain of reasoning that wound up with a weak link.

Yet, here I was, on the offensive again. My usual self, back in his corner, was starting to lose his nerve and cower a little.

Kyogokudo scratched his eyebrows, looking at me askance, then gave a short sigh and said, "Just stop thinking about psychics and mind readers, forever. Please."

"What do you have against psychics? Is it that you don't believe in the existence of something beyond the physical? What do you call what Enokizu does, then—a supernatural phenomenon?"

"That's even *worse*," my friend grumbled. His expression suggested he'd just taken a bite of something truly awful. "That leads right into the whole discussion of whether souls, or spirits, exist or not—which is all utter nonsense to begin with."

"Oh?" Atsuko chuckled like a child about to play a prank, and dug into her brother. "So you say, and yet, so much happens in the world that appears to be physically impossible. People who claim the soul exists try to prove it by citing supposed miracles like mystical bonds between family members over great distances, past lives, weeping statues, clairvoyance, psychic photography. None of these phenomena can be explained by natural science today. If at some later time they're proven to be in fact physically possible, then the

deniers of the soul can chalk one up for their side; but if they *can't* be proven possible, the deniers will have to come to terms with the fact that there is another power out there which cannot be described by science. Regardless of where you stand on the issue, it certainly doesn't sound like an unproductive discussion—or nonsense, as you're calling it."

"But it is unproductive," Kyogokudo insisted. "Take those scientifically unexplainable examples you just gave—I'll concede that they happen. Now, what does the soul-affirming crowd call these events?"

"Like I said, miracles."

"Right, miracles," Kyogokudo continued. "And I'm sure they get all excited about these miracles, saying 'oh how wonderful' and 'isn't it strange?' Which, of course, is no explanation at all. But if you call a miracle a miracle, then we can infer the idea that *miracles are not something which normally occur*—that's the worldview you're implicitly endorsing. That's what's fishy about it. And the deniers reject anything that doesn't fit into their little world outright. They ignore it, or say it's some kind of mistake. This is idiotic. Like I told Sekiguchi yesterday, when you call something miraculous or mysterious, it's only because whatever it is doesn't happen to fit within the range of current scientific knowledge. But things that just can't happen, won't happen. That's what I believe. Once something's happened, you can't go on saying it's impossible. And calling something hyper-normal, or supernatural, is vague. It certainly doesn't mean that it's something which is against nature, or outside the realm of knowledge."

"Sure, I understand what you're saying, but that doesn't mean the discussion is meaningless."

"Souls, spirits, and ghosts are just symbols, invented to make a difficult concept more easily understood. In other words, they're like numbers. There's no such thing as a 'one' in this world. So do we go saying there is no such thing as numbers? Of course not. The counterargument—that 'one' exists even if we can't see it—is laughable too. In the same way, a ghost isn't something that *is*, or *is not*. Think of it like this: what we call a 'ghost' is an *attribute* possessed by everything which exists in the universe."

"Wait a minute," Atsuko interjected. "If everything in existence has a ghost or spirit or whatever you call it, then not only people, but rocks and trees—even this table and the cushion you're sitting on—would have one, right? This is starting to sound like an old fable you might hear from some monk at a country temple."

"More like an old wives' tale, Kyogokudo." I gestured dismissively. "Everything has a spirit? Are you saying that if I were to hit this cushion, here, it would feel pain? That sounds like a good story to tell your kids if you want to keep the furniture looking new, but it's not really the sort of thing I expect to hear from you."

Our man of reason's face twisted into a scowl. "You two say the stupidest things sometimes. Why do you have to go anthropomorphizing the cushions? Pain is a signal sent by a nervous system to a brain. It's just one of the senses the brain cooked up to help protect living creatures from external stimuli it should avoid. I'm not talking about that at all."

"How to explain this... I know. Time."

I felt another of his arcane lectures coming on and guessed that what I'd just said must have come across as incredibly stupid. Embarrassment washed over me. Atsuko must have felt much the same; she had fallen unusually quiet.

"Can you explain to me what time is?" Kyogokudo demanded, favoring us with a mischievous look.

"Time? Not really, except to say it's the flow of, well, time."

"Quite. As you can see, we are surprisingly ill-equipped to explain time in an objective fashion. Nor does our current physics offer any suggestion how we might trace backward from the phenomenon we experience as time to its source—whatever that might be. We just follow blindly along. That's why when something like the uncertainty principle comes along, we get confused. When we want to talk about time, we like to make timetables, which are really handy when it comes to understanding the division of hours and minutes, but have nothing to do with time itself. This is similar to the way we go about trying to understand ghosts."

"Now, Sekiguchi, tell me: what is memory?"

"Uh, not forgetting things that happened in the past?"

"Remind me never to consult *your* dictionary. Tell me, how can we hope to understand memory when you cannot even properly define the past, or describe events around us? Simply failing to forget things is hardly a working definition of memory. Might as well say memory is remembering things and leave it at that."

"Stop picking on him." Atsuko frowned. "So, memory is one of those things which is difficult to explain—we get it. What's your point?"

Kyogokudo waved a hand for patience. "Bear with me. There are a number of ways of thinking about this. But what if we hypothesized that memory was matter's actual *passage* through time?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Take the universe—they say it consists of space and time, yes?"

"Okay."

"Put matter in space and what do you get? Mass. But what about putting matter in *time*? Sadly, at present, we can neither clearly express nor understand such a concept. Existence we understand, we can grapple with it, talk about it—but time simply passes unconditionally on. However, what if we thought of this passage of time as a sort of *temporal mass*? Perhaps this is memory at its most basic form. Turn it around, and you can say that all matter existing in

the universe has material memory.”

“So what, Kyogokudo? Are you saying that everything under creation, down to the smallest blade of grass, has a memory?”

“It’s just a way of thinking about it. Pretend it’s a metaphor, okay? Now, let’s call this material memory—memory in its most basic form—the ‘spirit’ of things. Well, if this is mere inanimate matter we’re talking about, whether it has memory or not is pretty much academic. It’s not about to sit up and tell you a rousing tale. But if the matter happens to be *living*, things are somewhat different. Incidentally, do you know what the difference between a creature and an inanimate object is?”

“Whether it possesses life or not?” I answered, looking to Atsuko for support.

She glanced back at me and added, “Well, if you’re talking material composition, there isn’t much difference between something living and something not... How about ‘life is the difference between a primitive organism and a simple pile of amino acids?’”

She was much better at this than I was.

Her brother shot her an annoyed look. “That’s a fine comparison, but as a definition it’s lacking. You’re still not telling me what life *is*. I don’t believe anyone has a clear answer to that question. But what if we took this material memory we were just discussing, bound it together by some means, and made it *active*—couldn’t we call its state ‘living’? Life, according to this view, is a coalescence of spirit, material memory endowed with agency. However, this kind of life is inherently improbable—unnatural, even—and thus it cannot endure for long. It dies, it breaks down straightaway. That’s why, in order for this memory-made-active to preserve itself, it was necessary for it to invent the technology of self-replication.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because life, in its truest form, *is* memory—how about that? It re-enacts its own history, its own structure. Of course, what happens next is you get living entities sharing memories, becoming more complex, and eventually, breaking down. What rescues this process is the haphazard discovery of an efficient method of passing on physical memory to future generations—genes. Yet this in turn makes the memories to be preserved all the more complex, and so on, in a vicious circle. But, life perseveres, and after a long period of highly unnatural evolutionary twists, we arrive at the creation of a new system for storing memory, called *the brain*. Now, at last, we have consciousness. Life is memory is mind. And the connection between life and the brain is consciousness.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but his ever-sharp sister chimed in immediately. “So if the spirit—which is a coalescence of material memory—is life, and that in turn is the mind—are you saying our hands, feet, and internal organs all have a mind?”

“Sure.”

“So my hands and my ears and every strand of my hair are thinking right now?”

“Thinking is the brain’s job. But the *will* to think, that is the mind. The mind, and *life*, are spread throughout the body, not fixed to one particular place. If we were to say our life was concentrated only in our hearts or brains, that would mean our posteriors and limbs were dead.”

He had a point. Nodding, I looked at Atsuko to see how she would respond.

“But you can cut off your arm and not die. Lose your head or your heart and you will.”

She had a point, too. Not wishing to appear totally lost, I risked joining the conversation. “That’s right,” I said. “That doesn’t jibe well with your theory of a spread-out mind.”

Kyogokudo laughed out loud at my late entry to the fray. “It’s easiest to understand if you think of the body as a vessel in which the spirit—or call it the soul, if you prefer—resides. Of course, this is merely an expediency, much like the timetable I mentioned earlier. The flesh is life. The two are indivisible. But, if you insist on nitpicking, let’s do a little thought experiment. Say we have a man whose heart has been shot out. Is he dead?”

“Of course he’s dead. He’s not Rasputin or Kohada Koheiji, is he?” I mean, maybe he’ll survive for a few moments, but the blood loss won’t take long to do him in.”

“Perhaps he wouldn’t be alive as a person. But what about his component parts? There is life there, for sure. You can gut a live fish and throw it on the plate and it will still be twitching. The muscles are still alive. Humans are just the same. The heart may stop, but the other parts live on for an indeterminate period. The heart is only an organ for circulating blood, after all. Nothing special. Of course, when the flow of blood stops, it can no longer deliver oxygen to the other organs. So the next to go is the brain. Now the rest of the body’s organs can no longer maintain their exchange of complex information. The body ceases to function as a higher life form. Some organs will carry on with lower level processes, but these are also set up to support each other so they gradually die off too. That’s what death is: the deactivation of the primal material memory, the dispersal of the coalesced spirit that is life. All returns to simple matter. Dust to dust. That’s why, while we may be able to point to one instant when a man loses consciousness, there is no one instant of death. A man dies slowly, part by part.”

“Well, that’s a pleasant thought.” Atsuko shivered. “I’m not sure I like the idea of parts of a dead person still lingering on.”

* The 19th-century character Koheiji is slain by his lover’s husband but comes back from the grave to haunt the couple.

"Oh, the liver lasts quite a while, apparently. So do the bones and skin. As for hair, it will keep growing as long as it can get oxygen. That's why even a corpse's hair will continue to lengthen."

"That reminds me," I said, "there was actually this doll whose hair grew—I wrote a story on it."

"Let me guess, it was the ghost of a dead child haunting the doll. I can see the headline now."

Bingo.

I sighed.

"Think about the common belief that when you die the soul departs the body—doesn't make much sense, does it? What about the parts still living? Are they someone else now? You can try to argue that the soul departs gradually, or the mind and body are separate, so it doesn't matter if the body dies—but neither of these arguments hold much water when you think about it. Yet accept the spirit as part of matter itself, and things like reincarnation become very simple to understand. After all, everything dies and is reborn in a different form through the web of life, the food chain. A living being takes materials into itself, making them and their material memory a part of itself. And when that living being returns to inanimate matter, another living being comes along and takes it in, and so on..."

Kyogokudo paused in his declamation and glanced at my face. Then he grinned. "Or at least, that all sounds pretty good. You can make up your own minds about whether to believe it or not."

"What is this, another trick of yours?" I grumbled.

Kyogokudo looked at me with a perfectly straight face. "No tricks, no deception. Why, I've never told a lie since the day I was born," he lied. "I'm merely offering a way of thinking that may be of some use to your understanding of Enokizu."

I had almost forgotten why I'd come to see him in the first place.

"Hold that thought." Atsuko got up and went to the kitchen, returning a short time later with some tea. She offered me a cup with an almost affectedly demure politeness. I had grown used to seeing her working side by side with men, so the feminine gesture made me smile. In contrast to the weak swill of the day before, this was a fine green tea with a delicious fragrance. I felt pleasantly revived as I drank it. Kyogokudo took a sip, then made some grunting noises with his mouth closed—probably to restrain himself from inadvertently uttering a compliment.

"Well, assuming we all agree with what's been said so far, we can assert that the brain is *not* the repository of memory. Rather, we might say it's the place where we play back and edit memories."

"Yesterday you called it a customs official."

"But wait," Atsuko broke in. "I've heard that neurologists have actually determined what parts of the brain are active when you do certain things, like recall information. They might even know where memories are stored."

Oh yeah, she's very good at this.

"Sure, they've figured out some cognitive processes. But they have no idea *how* memories are kept. The amount of memory human beings need to live is vast, my dear, no matter how efficiently you store it. Hard to imagine it fitting in such a small vessel."

My friend pointed to his own head. "Let's pretend any duplicate information gets discarded. When I look at you, I don't recognize you by thinking 'Ah! An animal, a primate. Monkey? No, human. Japanese. Male. A friend. Sekiguchi.' All the stuff before 'Sekiguchi' is abbreviated."

"Of course."

"Now look at her. Up to a point, she's the same as you. I abbreviate everything up to the part where I see she's a girl, even though she looks like a boy."

Atsuko frowned. "You could use a little abbreviation yourself."

"Back to Sekiguchi. Yesterday your shirt and trousers were all wrinkled, but today your clothes have been ironed. Yesterday you woke up at eight, but today you got up sometime after eleven."

He's right!

"How'd you know that? Are *you* doing soothsaying now?"

"No. I could tell by your facial hair. In other words, to differentiate between you today and the you of yesterday, all I had to do was look at that dirty stubble that grows on your chin like mold, and the number of wrinkles in your clothes. I can abbreviate everything else, and still have a decent picture of today's Sekiguchi to commit to memory."

"I see—because you already had that other information about me in storage."

"Right. Though actually, it's a lot more complex. The information we receive from our eyes has shapes, colors, angles. Everything is analyzed separately, duplication is abbreviated, and then the whole thing gets referenced with past memory and rebuilt. *That* is the reality I'm seeing now. When I look out of this room, I'm not seeing what's there. I'm seeing an image created by my brain after it picks and chooses what it wants me to see. It accepts some things, throws other things away, then constructs an image in a fashion I'll understand. Your eyes aren't glass windows. You can never see the world *as it is*. There is a rigorous selection process going on at all times. If it wasn't, we wouldn't be able to recognize a thing."

Kyogokudo paused briefly before continuing.

"This holds true for the other senses, too: hearing, touch. But think about it: sitting there breaking down everything around you and analyzing it piece

by piece is a considerable amount of work. It's a lot more efficient than trying to memorize everything whole, but still. This is the kind of thing that gives neurologists headaches. But, if we accept my whole-body theory, the burden on the brain is eased considerably—and voilà, no migraines."

"Well, I'll admit that your material memory idea has a certain appeal. But if it's true, then why do we need the brain at all? Can't we just use our whole-body memory?"

"That's stupid. Memory is fragmented, encoded—we can't digest it in its raw form, and it would be no use to us if we did. You need the brain to reformat it, or it's just going to sit there going to waste," Kyogokudo said, with particular emphasis on the word *stupid*.

"Even now, your brain is working at a furious pace. It pulls out all kinds of memories and sorts through them, faster than the eye could follow. It refigures reality, thereby creating consciousness. But the brain has another job, too, which is taking the reality you're experiencing now—all that fresh information pouring in—and breaking it down, and converting it into material memory. And it has to manage communications between all the other parts of the body, all independent of the conscious mind. It's constantly getting requests to increase adrenaline production, raise the heart rate, what have you—not a moment's rest. Are you telling me you'd be so cruel as to ask it to handle all your memory storage at the same time?"

"What choice do I have if the brain's the only man for the job?"

"Well, the brain certainly does keep itself busy. Which is why we sleep." Kyogokudo paused and took another sip of tea. "In order to manage all that information coming in through your sensory organs, along with your heart rate and whatnot, your brain needs some time alone, without the body and the mind getting in the way. That's what sleep is for. If it were only to rest the flesh, then the kind of half-assed rest we get while sleeping wouldn't make much sense. Did you know that when you sleep, your organs and muscles are doing pretty much the same work they do when you're awake? No, sleep happens so the brain can get itself straightened out and do the important work of editing the day's events.

"The mind isn't completely shut off while this is going on, though. That's why the consciousness struggles to the surface every now and then."

"Dreams?"

"Dreams. See, memory contains a lot of stuff that the brain never lets enter your consciousness during the waking day. A lot of old memories get dragged out in the shuffle, too. That's why events and situations you may never have seen or imagined come sauntering in out of nowhere and make themselves right at home in your dreams."

This was radically different from my understanding of the subject. But I could see the logic in what he was saying, which made my own notions seem

suspect by comparison—although if he was right, it would certainly detract somewhat from the mystery of those hours between evening and dawn.

"That makes reading people's dreams sound like a load of crock, then."

"Not really. Dream interpretation can hit the mark, especially if it's done very precisely. But if you're talking about telling the future, then whether you use dreams or not, it's all bunk. Well, except for perhaps some astrologists' conditional predictions. Incidentally, do you know why most animals close their eyes when they sleep?"

"Maybe because the information load coming in through the eyes is so much greater than the load from other sensory organs, and more complicated to manage?" Atsuko suggested.

"Right. As you'll recall from our little discussion of death, you can think of your organs as individual living entities. Same with your eyes and your optical nerves. They keep streaming information toward the brain whether you want it or not, unless you cut them off. And even then, they still cause trouble. Why? Because they're still functioning, even after they've been separated from the outside world—"

"Which is why we dream?"

"Precisely. Of course, dreams contain sounds, smells, and tastes, too, even though the visual realm takes center stage. This is because the nose, ears, and skin still function when you're asleep. You can't close your ears like you can your eyes, after all."

For a second, I had a strong feeling of *déjà vu*, until I realized that I had heard Enokizu say the same thing the day before.

"Relatively speaking," Kyogokudo continued, "the other senses are older than vision, and it doesn't take as much effort for the brain to process their information, I should think."

"You mean the other senses developed earlier?"

"Quite. Now, what would happen if you suddenly opened your eyes while you were dreaming?"

"You'd probably be confused."

"Well, sure. How about this: what would happen if, in the middle of a moving picture you were watching, the theater around you suddenly disappeared?"

"Well, you wouldn't be able to see the film anymore. You can't see a movie when it's light in the room."

"Yes. Likewise, real images are stronger than internally fashioned ones. It's just like the sun making stars invisible to us during the day. That's why animals choose the night, when there's less light, for sleeping. They can't see much when they open their eyes then, anyway. So, Sekiguchi: can you think of anything else that resembles dreaming as I've just described it?"

"You're talking about imagined realities again, aren't you?"

"Very good. It turns out that dreams and imagined realities are, aside from one key difference, remarkably similar in how they function. Both involve things that don't exist or didn't happen entering the consciousness in a form hardly different from the form reality takes there. They're both coming from the same source, which is memory. Nor can your consciousness accurately distinguish between them and reality. Where dreams and imagined realities differ is in whether you are able to wake from them and find that link back to reality, or not."

"Wait, so is this why most ghosts are seen at night, when there's less light?"

I was actually following his conversation for once, doubtless thanks to my unsettling experiences the day before. I wondered how much of this made sense to Atsuko.

Kyogokudo nodded. "Now, I want you to remember this stuff about dreams—you'll need it." He wordlessly motioned for his sister to pour him another cup of tea.

"Why's that? Are you saying dreams have some real significance?"

"If we agree that memory is not stored in the brain, but is an attribute of material itself, then it isn't hard to imagine our memories spilling out into other matter, such as the air and the ground around us."

"What, so what I'm thinking seeps out to you and Atsuko? That's odd, because I have no idea what *you're* thinking!"

"I'd be alarmed if you did."

"But Kyogokudo... I seem to remember that you said mind reading and all that was a load of crap. It sounds like now you're contradicting that!"

"It is crap," my friend sighed. "What we normally call 'mind' or 'thinking' is consciousness. But consciousness, might I remind you, is a private thing that arises in the connection between a person's mind and brain. How could someone see that? I'm talking about memories, not consciousness."

"So, no mind reading then."

"What does it matter if your memory spills? Does it do anything?" Atsuko asked.

"Yes. Because our brains receive that memory spillover from others and reconfigure it in the consciousness. But, just as with dreams and imagined realities—"

"Oh, I get it. We can't see the spilled memories beneath the glow of the real world. It's too bright."

"We can't, though we might sense them. Like sensing someone's there without seeing them. It isn't something you can physically prove, but all of us have had the experience. Now, let's imagine someone who receives a dramatically reduced amount of information from their eyes. When all around them is dark, what do they see on their silver screen?"

"You mean, Enokizu."

"You've got it. That guy is nothing but trouble... Looking in on people's memories—reconfiguring them, even."

Kyogokudo's line of reasoning had finally come to its outrageous conclusion.

It wasn't the kind of story that was easily swallowed. No matter how much of it made sense, it was so far out of the realm of what I considered to be commonly accepted fact that it seemed to me about as believable as ESP.

"Amazing," Atsuko breathed. "So Enokizu doesn't *read* people's memories, he *sees* them."

"Right. And as I've said many times before, much of what resides in memory never reaches the conscious mind. Take you, for example, Sekiguchi: you're always forgetting things. That's what happens when your brain tries to configure some memory, and there's a glitch, preventing that memory from entering your consciousness. Most lost items were lost by the person looking for them, so their brain *knows* where their reading glasses are, it just can't get that information where it needs to go."

"So that's how Enokizu could tell where people's lost things were."

"Yes, though he's often wrong."

"Well, I can't say that I don't understand you," Atsuko said with a sigh, "but none of what you're saying *feels* right to me."

I had to agree.

Kyogokudo looked at each of us in turn. "There is a disease found in people with damaged corneas called Charles Bonnet syndrome. People with this syndrome see things that aren't there—little demons, people, anything—even in the light of day. Unlike in dreams, the people affected are consciously aware they're hallucinating. And unlike those deceived by imagined realities, they know what they're seeing does not exist. This is probably close to what it feels like for Enokizu."

"So why can't these people with *chanson* syndrome or whatever it was see other people's memories like he can?" It made sense that they should be able to if bad eyesight were the only prerequisite.

"Oh, these sorts of abilities are probably affected by all kinds of factors. The location of the injury, hereditary disposition, whether it's the right eye or the left eye—little things like that."

Kyogokudo concluded by remarking that it wasn't the kind of ability most people would want anyway, as seeing such things was practically guaranteed to make life more difficult. And with this, his lecture was over.

I felt, once again, like the victim of some high-level con. Was this the Kyogokudo School of Exorcism in action again?

Atsuko seemed lost in thought.

"In any case," the bookseller said after a moment, "I have to admit this is

one theory I'm quite fond of. It's handy for explaining all sorts of things in a most satisfying way."

"It—it certainly is an unconventional idea. Wherever did you come across it?"

"Unconventional? I wonder..." Kyogokudo took a cigarette from his pocket. "When I was young, I lived on Shimokita Peninsula, in the north."

"Right, Osorezan"—

I was fuzzy on some of the details, but from what I remembered, Kyogokudo had been born near Osorezan and had lived on Shimokita Peninsula until he was seven or eight years old.

"The *itako* who work on the mountain there are priestesses, though not of any organized religion. What they do is channel the voices of the dead—shamanism, in other words—and the vast majority of them are blind or nearly so. I don't know if some kinds of blindness are hereditary, but regardless, doesn't it strike you as odd for so many in one profession to share an affliction? In fact, when you look into it, you'll find that blindness is common among psychic mediums. The honorable Mr. Yanagita talks in one of his papers about the *hitotsu-me kozo*, or 'one-eyed boy,' popular in ghost stories as being a poor-man's conceptualization of the priests of old. He points to stories of the one-eyed boy as suggesting a traditional custom among religious practitioners of closing one eye in order to see the spiritual world more clearly—an idea which I think accords nicely with the physiology of sight and memory as I described it."

Ting...

The wind chime rang.

"My guess is that when Enokizu came dashing gallantly out to solve the case, he saw a younger version of you in that woman's memory. Then he discovered you—the real, present-day you—sitting across from her. While he was still trying to process this, he was next assaulted by the vision of something like a corpse lying on the floor, which he realized must be Fujimaki. But Enokizu could only see it, he didn't know what it meant. So he started asking questions. He wanted to know why his client had come to see him."

"He must have thought that if she were the guilty party, she wouldn't have wanted an investigation."

"Yet she claimed to have come of her own free will."

"Which is why he next asked her if she was lying. And then—" Kyogokudo pointed at me. "He asked her about you."

I had to admit that this was the first thing I'd heard that started to make some sense of Enokizu's behavior. In fact it might well be the *only* plausible theory to explain the bizarre display I had witnessed in his office.

* A mountain in the northern prefecture of Aomori, its name literally means "Fear Mountain."

"His eyesight was always weak from the time he was a child, and occasionally, it allowed him to *see* things. At first he thought this was normal, but as he grew older he realized that not everyone could see the things he did. I was the only one who recognized that he had this ability, which led to us becoming friends. Then, in the war, a flare landed practically right on top of him; that's when he lost most of his sight. Oh, he gets by well enough, but I'm pretty sure he's almost completely blind in his left eye. Ironically, the loss of sight meant he could see other things with far greater clarity."

All this agreed with the stories I'd heard of Enokizu performing fortune-telling tricks in his brother's bar for the occupation forces. He had certainly never done anything like that before the war.

Kyogokudo turned toward the veranda and narrowed his eyes, gazing off into the distance. "I've tried explaining the source of his ability to him, but he won't listen to a word I say."

How like Enokizu.

We both chuckled despite ourselves. Yet, far in the back of my mind, an opaque unease lurked unsmiling.

"Kyogokudo," I spoke my friend's nickname deliberately. "What do you think it was that Enokizu saw in Ryoko Kuonji's memory?"

The source of my uneasiness, made clear.

"Who knows? As I said in the beginning, one can imagine any number of possibilities. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless... You don't suppose her family has a history of possession, do you? That would make this whole affair a great deal more complicated."

"Possession?"

Not for the first time, I wondered in amazement just how my friend's head was put together. What did anything about the Kuonjis' troubles have to do with possession?

"Well, it does no good to speculate," Kyogokudo said, as if that settled anything. He reached for the bone-jar on the table, took out a sweet, and popped it into his mouth. Then, leaving the lid off, he offered the contents of the jar to me.

"So, Sekiguchi, what do you intend to do about this case?" All trace of humor had fled his voice.

"Well, if I can," I took one of the proffered sweets, and spoke quickly before I could change my mind, "I think I'd like to get to the bottom of it. To solve it, if you will."

Kyogokudo frowned briefly, then said, "You can't rely on Enokizu. He'll just confuse things." He put the lid back on the jar, and rubbed it meditatively with his fingers. "Sekiguchi, remember that the act of observation has an effect on the subject."

"In particle physics, sure."

"It's the uncertainty principle. The best observations can only be made when the subject is not being observed."

"What does that have to do with this case?"

"Listen, you can't separate the observer from the observed—there's no such thing as the perfect onlooker. Your involvement *will* alter this case. You are no longer a good-intentioned, unrelated third party. To the contrary, you seem quite determined to insert yourself right into the thick of it. But know that some incidents would never occur without a detective's involvement, and the detective would be a fool to think he wasn't a part of the situation from the very beginning. Sekiguchi, remember the possibility that these dried sweets here only became what they are when I opened the lid of this jar. The same principle applies to this case."

Ding . . .

The wind chime tinkled again.

Kyogokudo and his sister sat in silence, staring at me.

"But—but I can't just drop it. Not like this."

What else could I say?

Kyogokudo crossed his arms. "Well, if a weak-willed fellow such as you can bring himself to say that, who am I to stop you? You're clearly obsessed for some reason with this case—and this woman, Ryoko Kuonji."

I didn't deny it.

"But whatever you do, keep your eyes from clouding over. Lose sight of what's going on, and the whole thing might just as well have never happened. Or worse," he warned, "if you, as an involved party with certain preconceived notions about the case, were to approach it in the wrong way—well, I fear some kind of tragedy might result."

So I have to approach the case the right way.

How do I do that?

"It's okay," my friend added after a moment, his mood suddenly brightening. "After all, it was me who told you to take responsibility, and this tomboy here who got you involved in the first place, so don't worry about it *too* much."

"Well now, if you've the courage, how about some dinner cooked by this manly sister of mine?"

Kyogokudo rose slowly to his feet. I hesitated a moment, but at his sister's urging, I eventually accepted their invitation to dinner.

As it happened, the gifted Miss Chuzenji's home cooking did much to settle my frayed nerves. Her eccentric brother, of course, uttered not one compliment throughout the meal.

Afterward, I helped them put up the mosquito nets. As on the night be-

fore, it was after ten when I finally got up to take my leave.

While I was putting on my shoes at the front door, the Jinhua cat appeared at the raised wooden threshold and meowed a greeting. I was playing with him absentmindedly when Atsuko came out into the hall.

"Sensei—" she said in a quiet voice. Hurriedly, my friend's sister tiptoed over to me and spoke even more softly. "Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you."

"Ask me? What?"

"I was wondering if I might join you tomorrow?"

This was unexpected.

"Atsu, you—I thought you gave up on that story?"

"I wouldn't be going so I could write about it. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but the whole thing has grabbed my interest—I mean, it would be presumptuous of me to say I want to see the case *solved*, but I would like to see it through to the end, whatever that may be. But no, I understand if I shouldn't go. It's not like you're doing this for the fun of it," she added, answering her own question. Her lively eyes glittered as she spoke. It was clear that her brother's insatiable intellectual curiosity ran in her blood. Hers might even be the healthier of the two.

"Actually, I'd very much like you to come," I told her sincerely. "No matter what Kyogokudo might say about Enokizu, I was a little nervous about going there alone with him. Please, do come, if your work will let you."

Atsuko's face broke into a smile, which just as quickly changed to a frown. "Please, don't tell my brother or Nakamura about this. My brother would be furious, and after what I said to Nakamura, I couldn't look him in the eye and tell him I went back—he's got his position to consider, and all."

I managed to stifle a laugh at hearing her say the exact thing Nakamura had told me the day before. I nodded. Atsuko smiled again; then, remembering, she produced the lantern she'd been carrying behind her. "You'll need this going down that hill. I heard you went without yesterday. Were you okay?"

In fact, I was very much not okay the night before, but I lied and told her I'd been fine. Not wanting to repeat the experience, this time I meekly accepted the light. It was rather an odd lantern, I noticed when I looked at it more closely, with a symbol like a star on one side.

Atsuko politely accompanied me down the walk and saw me off.

She must be spending the night at her brother's.

There was no moon to be seen in the sky. The clear weather earlier in the day had clouded up somewhere along the way.

Guess the rainy season isn't over, after all.

What's this star symbol, anyway?

A host of little questions were prickling at my consciousness, yet they failed to drown out the feeling of dread welling inside me.

I know. It's a good luck charm to ward off evil. I'd heard about something like that in the Army. And the stars on officers' shirts were really to ward off bullets.

Some comfort that is, my inner self was saying. They wore the stars, but they got shot anyway. I'm carrying this lantern, but I might just get dizzy and keel over.

That night, nothing happened as I walked down the dark hill toward the station and home.

I was in a place like a wasteland—or perhaps it was the seashore. I was walking. A woman was dragging me along by the hand. It was a festival day. I could hear the drums beating in the distance.
Dom... Dom...

How embarrassing to be led by the hand at my age.

It's okay, I thought, I'm just a child.

My heart grew lighter.

Several virtuous-looking monks in black robes stood along the shore, holding up Buddhist crosiers with metal rings that rattled when they shook them. This I found so fascinating, it was hard to tear my eyes away. But the woman pulled harder, yanking me toward the night market.

She was saying things like, "See? Isn't it pretty?"

I still wanted to look at the monks. The woman made a sour face.

I should apologize to her, I thought. But I didn't know what to call her. Strange, considering that she had given birth to me. I must've called her name countless times.

I mumbled something. *She hates it when I mumble.* She'd have to punish me now.

Oh well.

The woman grabbed me by the hair and pushed my face into a sand dune. She was howling at me, but the sand got in my ear and I couldn't hear a thing.

Too bad I can't shut my ears.

The sand kept flowing in through my ear canal, making my head incredibly heavy.

I twisted my neck and saw that the hem of the woman's kimono had hiked up, revealing the pale white skin of her calf.

I shouldn't look.

I tried to twist my head in the other direction, but she was pressing down on me too hard.

The monks had skewered something on the ends of their staves, and they lifted it high in the air, whooping for joy.

They're happy because they've caught a fish.

But that's no fish.

One of the monks said, "It happens sometimes."

They had skewered a human infant.

The woman didn't like it that I had been looking at them. She scowled and strode in between the night market stalls. It was like a desert bazaar,

there, with merchants hawking all manner of things, from cloth dyed in gaudy colors to African bullfrogs.

I wanted to call out to her, to stop her, but I couldn't remember how.

I don't want to be alone.

I'm still just a little boy.

She doesn't like it when I mumble. She says she's going to punish me.

She grabs me by the hair and pushes me into a sand dune.

The sand is very hot, and crawling with daddy longlegs. It's very unpleasant.

Hundreds of the spindly creatures cling to me, walking down my belly and up my spine, pricking me with their feet.

Please, don't let them get in my ear.

I forced my head up, gritting my teeth against the pain. The woman was very strong, so it was very difficult, and when I finally lifted my face, her bare neck lay exposed before me, and I became more and more agitated.

Her kimono hung down at her neck, revealing the white swell of her breasts, and though I knew I should not look, I could not close my eyes.

Oh well, I thought, and I slipped out of the woman's grasp, intending to head for the living room. I took two or three unsteady steps across the dune.

I slid open the papered door to find my wife reading the newspaper.

She lifted an eyebrow and looked at me suspiciously, but there was nothing I could do about that now. What could I have done? After all, I was only a child—the kind who gets punished.

I didn't want any daddy longlegs on my cushion, so I patted myself carefully to brush them off before sitting down. I knew the sand in my ear wouldn't pour out, so that was okay. My wife furrowed her brow.

"What's the matter? Are you still sleeping?"

"No, of course not. It's just, I got this headache—"

"You probably slept wrong, then. No surprise there. You were moaning all last night, and you ended up half off the futon."

She stared at me closely.

I thought there might be a daddy longlegs on my nose; suddenly it began to prickle so much that I had to wipe my face with both hands.

"Dear, your face is covered with lines from the tatami. It's making me itch just to look at it."

So it's not a daddy longlegs?

Why would there be a daddy longlegs here anyway?

It suddenly occurred to me that there wouldn't. *Of course not.*

"Mother!"

The word came back to me quite suddenly. But I couldn't imagine why I had forgotten it. No, I couldn't imagine why I had been trying to remember it.

"What about your mother?" my wife asked.

Nothing at all. I hadn't seen my mother since we'd gone home for New Year's. But I remembered, now, that—perhaps because she'd been a schoolteacher for many years—she never wore a kimono, which was unusual for a woman of her generation. The only Japanese clothes I had seen her in were those floppy trousers everyone was wearing during the war.

Why did that matter?

Who was it that had been wearing a kimono?

"Ryoko Kuonji."

Finally, I woke up.

My wife rolled her eyes and said, "Tatsu, please, get a hold of yourself." She called me that whenever we were alone. "And just who is this Kuonji person?"

Hearing the name "Kuonji" out of my wife's mouth made me feel guilty, though I wasn't sure of what. I muttered something meant to be an excuse.

My wife, Yukie, was two years younger than me, which made her twenty-eight or twenty-nine. I'm insouciant when it comes to ages; I have to think twice to say exactly how old I am. Yukie looked old for her age, though. I suppose you could say she looked "settled," but in truth, she'd had a hard life. She was so often tired. When we met, she was a girl of eighteen or nineteen, so it didn't show, but recently I found her looking exhausted more often than not. Torakichi had praised her beauty the other day, and indeed, there were still times when I was startled by her beauty, even though she was my own wife, but at other times she seemed nothing more than average. These were the times when she was really tired, so I always felt a bit responsible.

She looked tired now.

"You're not a child. I'd expect you to be able to wake up properly," she said, laughing, and poured me a cup of tea. I was frequently saved by my wife's laughter. Yet today, even the wrinkles that formed at the corners of her eyes when she laughed looked thin and wasted.

"What have you been up to lately, Tatsu? You go out every day, and every day you look worse and worse."

"What?" I objected. "It's not like this is *Botan Doro* or anything. I'm researching a novel."

Actually, it *was* a bit like the story of the peony lantern—in which case I would have to be the man who falls in love with a woman, only to discover that he has, in fact, been sleeping with a skeleton. Realizing he's wasting away, he puts up wards to protect himself from the ghost, until one night he forgets (or, in some versions, is betrayed) and his body is later found entangled with his ghost-lover's bones.

Yet, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to tell my wife about the case. It wasn't that I didn't want to worry her; rather, the fact was that I felt a certain embarrassment about it all.

What was that nightmare I'd had just now? I couldn't remember any of the details, but I was pretty sure Ryoko Kuonji had made an appearance. It was hard to believe that even though I had still been dreaming just moments before, when I sat down on the very cushion where I was seated now, the memory of the experience seemed as vague as something a hundred years in the past. Of course, I could be confident that none of it had *meant* anything, since Kyogokudo had single-handedly wrenched the last vestiges of mystery from the dreaming process the day before. Still, it took a while for the echoes of the dream to fade.

Luckily, Yukie was not the sort of wife to inquire deeply into her husband's work, so I was able to leave the house without a further word of explanation. I couldn't help but feel that I was somehow deceiving her, though I decided not to worry about it. It wasn't as if I was cheating.

Yet although I slipped out of the house without difficulty, as soon as I reached the street I found myself in a quandary. I wanted to go to Zoshigaya, but I had no idea how to get there. It had been years since I'd last gone in the direction of Toshima Ward in the northwest of the city; I couldn't remember being back there since that trip to the Kishimojin festival when I was still a student. I'd never had a very good impression of the place, even before the war. There was an asylum for the insane in Sugamo, and a prison. Other than that, it was all graveyards. That was my impression, at least.

Of course, there was Gakushuin, an upper-class private school in Mejiro, to the south, and Ikebukuro had Rikkyo University, but neither school had ever figured much in my mental image.

Then when the war came Toshima had been hit hard in the bombing—I'd heard nearly all of it had burned. And out of the ashes came the black markets. They had grown like weeds, springing up through the rubble in the brief period before law and order could return. I'd heard that at their height there were over ten thousand of them in Japan.

Personally, I couldn't stand the idea of black markets. The lack of order, the coarse violence in the voices of the thronging masses: everyone asserting themselves, struggling for their right to live in the midst of full-out chaos—I didn't like any of it. Somehow, I had managed to avoid ever going to one.

Of course, some people said the markets were the only place one could see mankind's true nature and strength. They were probably right. Our rapid economic recovery wouldn't have been possible without that black-market vitality backing it.

In war, we take lives irrespective of our own will or inclination. It could be said that there is nothing human about the battlefield. Yet if we postulate that our humanity is that which we have and animals do not, the bizarre repeated slaughter of mass combat must be called human. That thought had led me to wonder what it meant to be human in the first place. I had always felt that my most human act on the battlefield was to cower there, a whimpering dog afraid to die.

My dislike of the black markets was not based on the feeling of alienation a foreigner has upon entering a strange world, nor on the fear of a small animal sucked down into a bottomless mire. It was rooted in the unsettling knowledge that, were I to enter that marginal world, the black market within myself might somehow be exposed. It was this premonition that had kept me away.

I knew I carried within me my own antithesis. Immorality. A life force that, perversely, seemed to love the darkness. I wanted to put a lid on it and keep it hidden away. Black markets and the like beckoned to me just as candle traps beckon to moths—and so I avoided such places whenever possible, in order to live my life with my own black market firmly shut inside.

The markets came under the rule of law shortly after the war ended and were branded as illegal, but all that this initially accomplished was to refine their underground methods. In particular, the markets around Ikebukuro only seemed to go deeper the more pressure they came under. So, gradually, Ikebukuro had become a special place for me—harder to approach than either Ueno or Shinbashi, though both had similar establishments. Like some unlucky quarter, the entirety of Toshima Ward had become a place for me to quite irrationally avoid at all costs.

Only perhaps a year had gone by since the black market in Ikebukuro finally disappeared. Though traces of it no doubt still remained, I'd heard they were building a large, clean station plaza there now. I had lost whatever reason I'd had to avoid the place.

I was walking toward the station, with no certain knowledge, and no clue as to the public transportation I would need to reach my destination, when a bus happened to stop near me on the street. The plate at the front of the bus read "For Waseda."

Waseda University was in the same general direction that I was going. I got on.

The bus was rather crowded. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to ask

an elderly man sitting near the front what route I should take. He seemed a bit surprised at first, but eventually told me the way. I wasn't too far off course, though I realized the bus might not have been the quickest way to get there.

I followed the man's advice, and changed to a streetcar at Waseda. This part of town wasn't that far from the familiar streets of Nakano, but I had no feeling for the lay of the land here. *At least the view isn't bad.* I wondered what the man on the bus had thought of me. For some reason, it concerned me more than it should have.

From my youngest days, I'd had trouble overcoming the irrational sense of inferiority I often felt in the presence of others. There was a time when I suffered under the delusion that I was mad, and the people I met were taking pity on me. This, I later decided, had most likely been a frighteningly negative means of psychological self-defense. Whenever my parents or a teacher scolded me, I would wonder how they could scold a madman so bluntly. *Don't they feel pity for me?* I'd ask myself. Other times I thought, *Of course they're scolding me. I'm crazy. I can't help it.* Either thought took a great weight off my shoulders, which was why I actively preferred my gloomy little delusions to any more realistic view of society. At some point, however, I realized that escaping responsibility in such a backwards way always leads to a dead end, because, in order to maintain my irrational beliefs, I had to spend the bulk of my time wondering if I really was different from everyone else.

Thus was my daily life filled with unease. Hypersensitive as I was to the eyes of others, I often had trouble getting along; because I could only ever achieve normalcy inside myself, to the outside world I remained an alien. How else could it be? So I had cut off my ties to the world, encasing myself in a protective shell of depression. It was only at the hands of Enokizu, Kyogokudo, my other friends, and my wife, that the shell had finally been broken.

I wondered if the man on the bus thought that I was sane. It occurred to me that I had wondered the same thing before, a long time ago, though I couldn't remember when.

The streetcar arrived at the Kishimojin stop.

I knew I'd been here before. But though I felt I remembered it, I couldn't be absolutely certain. Most of the place had been rebuilt after the bombing, so I surely wouldn't have recognized it anyway.

Ryoko Kuonji had said that the clinic was on the eastern side of Homyoji Temple. I thought that Kishimojin might actually be another name for Homyoji, but I couldn't be certain of that either. I wondered at myself for being so eager the day before. Did I really think I could solve this case? Now, stepping off the streetcar, I felt the first pangs of regret. Until my foot touched the pavement, the events of the day before had been as vaporous and unclear as my strange dream that morning.

But it hadn't been a dream. When I arrived at our meeting place—the Kishimojin grounds—Atsuko Chuzenji was already there, waiting for me, the unreliable assistant detective.

"Sensei!"

Atsuko was wearing a gray checkered hunting cap with matching trousers and leather suspenders, like a young boy's. But the slender wrists that emerged from the rolled-up sleeves of her white shirt made her look strangely like a little girl at the same time. It was an odd effect.

"Sorry for forcing you to take me along," she said. She bowed her head in a boyish-girlish way.

"Has your frightfully insightful brother caught on?" I asked, much as if we were lovers at a clandestine meeting. For some reason, the moment I saw her face I'd felt my churning stomach settle, and the unease and regrets that had plagued me the moment before were entirely swept away. The troubles that had beset my journey faded to unreal dreams.

In an instant, the *me* of today was reconnected to the *me* of the day before.

Atsuko stuck out her tongue and told me he'd figured her out. "Right after you left."

"Saw right through you, huh? He's hard to fool, that one. Did he tell you off?"

"It's okay," she said nodding her head and smiling. "And, *sensei*, I have a message for you."

"From Kyogokudo? What could it be now?" I wondered aloud.

"Well, he told me to tell you to look for the diary and the love letter."

"Is that some kind of riddle? Why can't he say anything plainly?"

"It seemed to me like he didn't remember the facts too clearly himself, actually. But he said he was sure Fujimaki had written a love letter. And that you might know something about it."

I had no idea what he meant.

"Oh, and he also said that Fujimaki was obsessive about keeping a diary, so we might be able to find something that way, too."

"Well, if such a thing existed, it would be a vital key to solving this mystery. Though I'm sure he didn't write anything the night of the vanishing, anything leading up to it might shed light on what happened."

"But, if Fujimaki planned his disappearance, do you think he would leave evidence like that behind? Anyway, my brother said that if we did find any diaries we should look for one from twelve years ago—that's the important one, he said. Whatever could he mean?"

"How should I know? *You're* his sister."

We decided we should probably find some place to sit down, so we ventured into the temple grounds and discovered a bench someone had abandoned in a corner, where we sat to wait for Enokizu. The plan had been to

meet at twelve-thirty, which was still five minutes off.

Although it wasn't a festival day, there were a few stalls set up along the main path into the temple. We saw two or three people come to pay their respects, but the tea house was closed, and the temple grounds were startlingly quiet.

"I'd heard that this area got hit bad, but the temple must have escaped the worst of it."

"How's that?"

"I mean, look at the trees along the main approach. They're quite old. And this tree right here has been standing at least a century."

Indeed, even the thick trees around the main entrance could not have grown in just a few years.

A shriek cried, out of season.

"Do you think Mr. Enokizu will come?" Atsuko asked suddenly.

Truth be told, I was concerned myself.

"I think that, like your brother said, we shouldn't rely on him too much. We'll wait until forty minutes after, and if he hasn't come by then, we should go on to the clinic. Don't want to keep the client waiting."

I half-expected him not to show. Sure enough, twelve-thirty came and went and the detective was nowhere to be seen. Then twelve-forty came and went. Just as we were standing up to leave, a bizarre rumbling noise came from the temple entrance. Reflexively, we looked in the direction of the sound, unable to comprehend its meaning after sitting in silence for so long.

I saw someone dressed like an American pilot stalking around a big, dark object in the middle of the road.

"Sensei, it's Mr. Enokizu!"

"Huh?"

The man in the road began kicking the object.

As the old men running the street stalls and a scattering of temple visitors watched from a distance, we hurried toward the focus of everyone's attention.

There was Enokizu, furiously kicking what turned out to be a fallen motorbike with a large sidecar. He was shouting—things like "bah!" and "shit!"

"Eno! What are you doing?"

Enokizu noticed us and stopped his kicking. "You're here!" He waved to us. "Ah, it's Atsu. I was wondering who that was. Cute as always!"

"Hello. I asked to come along. I hope you don't mind?"

Enokizu laughed out loud. "Mind? Me? Why, the mere thought of going to some dismal clinic alone with monkey-man here had me contemplating hanging myself three times already this morning. Now, if Kyogokudo had shown up instead of you, this could well have been the darkest, most dismal day on record—but you, Atsu, are most welcome. In fact, you can go home now if you want, Seki," he added cheerfully.

I glowered at Enokizu. Surprisingly, there was not a trace of yesterday's melancholy about him. He seemed like an entirely different person. Nor did he look anything like a detective. No; today, he was a fighter pilot. If this was the result of another two-hour session of agonizing over how to best look the part, then I had to question his basis for judgment.

"What are you doing, Eno? What's all that?"

"This here, Seki, is called a sidecar. See? It lets two people ride one motorbike!"

"I-I know *that*," I stammered.

Atsuko began to laugh quietly.

"That so? Hey, remember when that M.P. nearly ran his jeep over me? Well, the guy who did it—I think his name was Hayes or something—gave this to me by way of apology. I hadn't ridden it for a while and it stopped working, but I fixed it this morning and everything was going great until I got here. Now it's stopped again."

"Why ride a thing like that, today of all days?"

"I thought it'd be faster. Speaking of which, we should get going. To the clinic!"

Immediately Enokizu started walking, although it was clear he had no idea which way to go.

"Eno," I called out to him, "what about your motorbike? It'll get stolen."

The detective whirled around and grinned. "Not *my* motorbike, old chap. As of this moment, the man who jumps on this motorbike and drives it home is not the guy who stole it, but the guy who picked it up. Why? Because I've just thrown it away."

He laughed again. Atsuko and I shrugged and shook our heads like the Americans do.

According to Atsuko, Homyoji Temple and the temple to Kishimojin were separate buildings. Officially, Kishimojin was located on Homyoji grounds. That said, the main temple and Kishimojin were some distance apart. In between the two were several patches of woods and even some houses, making it difficult to tell where the temple grounds ended and private land began. Also—still going according to Atsuko, who was merely repeating what she had heard from Kyogokudo—there was supposedly a large graveyard on the eastern side of the temple where the Kuonji Clinic was supposed to be.

The graveyard in Zoshigaya was one of seven established in Tokyo in the late 1800s, and it spread over 95,000 square meters. This was very likely the graveyard that had sprung vaguely to mind when I thought of Toshima Ward.

The path toward the temple wound and twisted through the trees, making it feel like a route through a maze—one that I was now sure ended smack in the middle of the graveyard. For some reason, the idea of going into a

graveyard right now struck me as distinctly unpleasant, and I could feel my feet grow suddenly heavier.

But before we reached any graveyard, we found our way blocked by the copse that surrounded the temple.

"It's like we're lost in the jungle here," I said. "If there is a graveyard ahead, then the clinic must be through these houses on the other side."

Across the way from the wood were several houses and a narrow road lined with stores. If we didn't turn toward them but kept following the path around the forest, we were sure to find ourselves in the middle of that giant graveyard. I was certain of it.

But Enokizu paid me no mind and kept walking.

"Eno, that way goes to the graves. Atsuko just said the graveyard is huge. It must cover that whole side of the temple."

"And our client plainly said the clinic was on the eastern side. Don't tell me you forgot those directions she gave us, monkey face. I think we should believe the person who lives here, don't you?"

"What do you mean 'believe'? You weren't even listening to her."

"Knowing your chronic forgetfulness, I had the presence of mind to ask Kazutora. See, there's the road."

Following him, we had come to a break in the dense wood, through which ran a narrow offshoot of the road we were on.

"I'm telling you, that leads right to the graveyard."

And I'm not going to any graveyard.

Just around the corner lay nothing but a field of death, I was sure of it. I could almost see the bleak rows of grave-markers.

"You're such a square, Seki. Don't tell me you're frightened?"

Maybe I am.

"There're no graves here, *sensei*," Atsuko called out from the road. I had thought she was walking behind us, but somehow she'd managed to slip ahead. "It looks like the graves are up on the hill across the tracks. Down here is all trees and houses."

Lies. The only things here are graves, prisons, and asylums.

"Seki, old chap. Sekiguchi! Get a hold of yourself," Enokizu said, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me down that forbidden road.

Just like in my dream. Now I'm going to be punished.

I closed my eyes.

If I opened them I'd see something I shouldn't.

White calves, white breasts.

"*Sensei*? Are you all right?"

It was Atsuko Chuzenji's voice.

I'm not dreaming.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

I saw the clinic.

I've been here before. It wasn't déjà vu; I had a clear memory of the scene before me. The large stone building. A brick wall along the road. The forest.

Even the pebbles along the path leading up to the gate looked familiar.

As we neared the gate, I noticed that the brick wall was badly damaged in places—probably scars from the bombing.

I was sure it hadn't been damaged *the last time*.

When was the last time?

There was a ringing in my ears.

We reached the foyer: doors set with large panels of smoked glass.

The sign reading "Kuonji Clinic" had been worn half away by years of weather.

It all felt the same...

I opened the gate. There was no one at what appeared to be the reception desk.

No one had been there *the last time*, either.

Enokizu announced our arrival in a loud voice; a moment later, Ryoko Kuonji emerged from the back.

Suddenly, I was back in reality again.

"Thank you for coming such a distance."

Miss Kuonji's slightly wavy hair was bound behind her head, and she wore a thin white blouse and a tight-fitting black skirt. Though her attire was completely different from the day before, she still gave me the same impression: that of a woman in a monochrome photograph, frozen in time.

"No, no, I must apologize for my behavior yesterday," Enokizu bowed deeply. "As I'm sure you're aware, it is a detective's business to suspect people, and sadly, our clients are no exception. I'm afraid I may have some rather insensitive questions for your family today, also; but please, rest assured it all serves to help solve this case. Perhaps if you could warn them for me ahead of time it might lessen the shock."

I had not expected Enokizu to show anything like this amount of tact. Neither had Atsuko, apparently. She looked positively astonished.

"Of course," Miss Kuonji responded. "I must apologize in advance, too. My parents are old-fashioned and can occasionally be quite blunt. Please, don't take it personally." She bowed in return. The wax figures were talking again. She looked at me with her doll-like face and smiled faintly. "Thank you for coming, too, Mr. Seki. And, your companion...?"

Enokizu replied immediately. "Ah, she's my other able assistant, Miss Chuzenji. Far more able than Seki, I might add."

It seemed that Atsuko had been lost in the strange atmosphere between

the two. Hastily she introduced herself.

Miss Kuonji's face betrayed a momentary confusion, but her mild expression quickly returned. "I've never heard of a lady detective. My name is Kuonji."

I felt a faint aura of tension blossom around the meeting of these two wholly different women.

"Also—" Enokizu interjected suddenly.

I had been standing perfectly still, caught in the strain of the moment, but now, startled, I clumsily kicked the shoe I had just removed.

"—might I further apologize if I must leave at a moment's notice in the middle of our proceedings. Please, do not be dismayed. This too is a rather unique, yet necessary habit for a detective. Even should I depart, my two assistants will remain here to continue with the questions."

"Well, if it is necessary, I'm sure I don't mind—" Miss Kuonji said, groping for an appropriate response.

Coming from anyone else, Enokizu's remark would surely have been taken for a joke, but he was dead serious. In fact, I could imagine him doing that very thing, so perhaps it was wise of him to give us fair warning.

We were led to what appeared to be the drawing room in the residential quarters toward the back of the clinic. It was an elegant room. The furnishings were old, but all of the highest quality. I attributed the patchwork quality of some of the walls to damage from the firebombing. The hastily repaired sections stood out all the more against the sturdy construction of the original building.

Ryoko Kuonji politely asked us to wait for a moment and then left the room. We sat down on an expansive sofa and waited there for a while in silence, like students anticipating their turn for oral exams.

My thoughts drifted back to the strange feeling I'd had upon our arrival. I had been here *before*, but when was *before*?

I couldn't think of any possible reason why I would have needed to come to this clinic.

"She really is beautiful. I can see why you were waxing poetic when you described her, *sensei*." Atsuko peered around the room with wide eyes. After a few moments her gaze turned to the mantle above a fireplace on the right side of the room. "Hey, that photograph—do you think that could be Miss Kuonji?"

The picture Atsuko had discovered was an old-looking cabinet photograph in a gilt frame. It was an image of two girls standing together. They looked very similar. Both were quite thin, and very beautiful, with their hair worn down to the shoulder. They had on the same Western-style clothes. One was smiling, and the other's brow was furrowed; she looked troubled.

"Why, they look as if they could be twins," Enokizu noted. "Perhaps they

took a double exposure? No, I see the smiling one is clearly our girl."

"Really?" Atsuko said, tilting her head slightly. "I thought the one on this side—the one who's frowning—was her."

There, in that monochrome photograph: I had seen that troubled expression somewhere before. Atsuko was right—the one without a smile was Ryoko Kuonji. The picture must have been taken when she was still a schoolgirl. If that was true, she was far more beautiful now. And the other girl, the smiling one, had to be her sister—Kyoko Kuonji.

But no, I decided, I remember the smiling one. Definitely.

I met her then. The girl in the photograph. I met her when I came here before. White calves. And red, red...

—Leave him be. He's a crazy, escaped from the asylum in Sugamo, most likely.

I remembered. I had stopped to ask directions on my way here.

One of the men had been late in years, the other a middle-aged gentleman. I had been utterly lost and had asked the two of them for directions to the hospital.

—Hospital? Nothing like that nearby.

—Yeah. Nothing but graves around here, son.

—Well? Aren't you going to say anything? Where are your manners?

—Leave him be. He's a crazy, escaped from the asylum in Sugamo, most likely. That's the only hospital in these parts.

—Oh, of course. He wants to go home.

I felt the back of my head grow hot. Maybe I *was* crazy. Maybe I hadn't been deluding myself. I couldn't speak a word. Sweat ran in rivulets down my face, and everything before my eyes went dark.

I'm not mad. I'm sane. I was just pretending.

—He's a crazy.

All at once I understood. I had hidden away the memory of that day completely, just so I would forget that one word spoken by the man I had asked for directions. I must have cultivated my entirely unrelated distaste for the black markets of Ikebukuro after the fact, to keep myself from coming back here. The shell of my depression hadn't really been broken, after all. I had just pulled a layer of sanity over it, somehow making it fit. *I know what I am. I'm—*

The love letter.

Then, I remembered it all.

Makio Fujino was talking to me.

—You've heard, haven't you, Sekiguchi? You know I'm terribly in love. Surely you've heard them making fun of me.

—I'm serious, Sekiguchi. I can't sleep at night, thinking of her. I can't touch my studies. I can't even eat.

—*You're the only one who doesn't laugh. The rest, they deride me all the time. But I don't care.*

—*I talked to Chuzenji. He told me I should write a letter. He takes me seriously, you know. He understands...but doesn't think much of me. He's right, too. Just look at me! A girl of sixteen has stolen away my very soul, and I can't even confess my love for her. I'm a coward. I don't even know if writing a letter will help sort out what I'm feeling... I just don't know.*

—*It took me two whole nights to write this—three nights, actually. And I'm not even sure if it's any good. I lost count of the pages I tore up.*

—*For a long time I wondered whether I should post it, or just give it to her. But I can't let anyone in her family see me. I've waited for her on the road several times, but I couldn't bring myself to hand it over.*

—*Please, I want you to take the letter to her.*

—*Maybe you think me less of a man for this.*

How was I to know what made a man? All I knew was that an upperclassman, my friend, seemed deeply troubled.

—*I'll only ask this once. If you think less of me for it, well, I'd just as soon have you refuse. I promise, in the unlikely event that she does reply, I will go to her myself...as a man.*

—*You must give it to her, and her alone.*

—*To Kyoko Kuonji.*

At the time, I didn't understand what it meant to be a man, or even a human for that matter. No, it was more than that: I didn't understand why this friend would have to justify anything to me, or to the world. I accepted his request, and went to the place he indicated.

—*He's a crazy.*

I ran, as if that could undo what had been said. But even as I did I understood that I could no longer find safe haven in self-delusion. The little jewel box of tranquility I'd spent so long constructing had been prized opened by this complete stranger, its contents dashed upon the ground.

—*I'm sane. You're the ones who are crazy—*

I found myself standing at an intersection on the narrow road that led to the clinic.

There was no one at the reception desk. Which made sense. It was evening; visiting hours had long since passed. I wasn't aware of making any sound, but someone came out to greet me anyway—a young girl, her hair trimmed at the nape of her neck.

—*Are you looking for someone?*

—*I'm sorry, my parents aren't at home.*

Her white skin had been molded from wax.

—*Is that a letter?*

—*Who is it for?*

I couldn't look her in the eye. Instead, I focused on the girl's lips, twitching on her face like an entirely separate organism, talking to me.

—*Is something wrong? Do you feel unwell?*

I can only give this letter to the addressee. I made a promise, I told her. I showed her the front of the letter without lifting my eyes.

—*You're in luck. It's for me.*

I stood unmoving, staring down at the ground. For some reason, I was unable to hand her the letter.

—*If the letter is for me, might I have it?*

I imagined her lips moving, that soft undulation.

—*It wouldn't happen to be a love letter, would it?*

Unthinking, I looked up.

The girl was smiling.

Her white fingers stretched out, and she took the letter from my hand.

—*Is it from you?*

I looked down again without saying a word. White blouse. Dark-colored skirt. Two white legs.

A single line of bright red blood ran down one of her white calves.

Startled, I looked up at her face.

She laughed with her mouth closed—an oddly bewitching sound.

Mm hm hm.

Crazy—

I'm not crazy. This is no beautiful girl standing here.

—*Did something startle you?*

The girl leaned closer, and whispered in my ear.

—*Want to play?*

Then she bit my ear lobe.

I ran for my life.

My ears were ringing. My face burned. What was happening to me? *I'm not crazy. Everything else is crazy. That girl, she's crazy—*

I couldn't look back. She was laughing. White legs. Red blood.

—*He's a crazy.*

—*Mm hm hm.*

“Sensei, you look pale.”

Atsuko Chuzenji was staring at me.

I found myself facing reality, in real time, the lid still open on those forbidden memories I had sealed away more than a decade ago.

“I just—I just remembered the love letter. I came here once, a long time ago, when I was still a student. Fujimaki sent me here.”

Saying even that left me breathless.

"Seki, don't tell me you had to strain so hard to remember *that*. You're sweating bullets," Enokizu said. "So, there really was a love letter?"

"There was. I'm amazed Kyogokudo remembered it."

The detective put a hand to his forehead. He looked despondent. "Seki, thanks for going through all that trouble to remember this, but it has absolutely no impact whatsoever on our case. The only thing you've proven is that your memory is as bad as I'd feared."

"That's not true at all," I protested.

It wasn't. We knew that Ryoko and Kyoko Kuonji had looked very much alike when they were young, and I was now certain that I had never met Ryoko Kuonji after all—I'd met her sister, and that is what Enokizu had seen. He must have glimpsed the encounter not in Miss Kuonji's memory, but in mine. And that lifted some suspicion from Ryoko; if she hadn't known me before our meeting in Eno's office, then she hadn't been lying.

I explained this to Atsuko. Enokizu listened in silence, fixing me with a skeptical glare. He had no idea what I was talking about—no doubt because he didn't understand the nature of his own talent.

"Whatever it is you're saying about memory there, Seki, you're entirely wrong," he said with a shrug.

Yoshichika Kuonji, who was both the director of Kuonji Clinic and the head of the Kuonji household, looked nothing like what I had expected. He had a wide, hairless forehead, a big, meaty face with a ruddy complexion, and eyes half buried in flesh. The thin hair that clung to his temples was pure white. He sat with his legs sprawled, his white doctor's gown open at the chest.

His wife, Kikuno Kuonji, who was in charge of the clinic's finances, was by contrast almost noble—a woman of good posture, with the air of the wife of a samurai lord in some kabuki play. She must have been a knockout in her day, though age had dimmed her beauty somewhat.

"What's the meaning of this, bringing these absolute strangers into our house? And you want us to talk to them about our private family affairs?" The mother spoke in a tense voice, eyes fixed on her daughter in a piercing glare. She stood with emphatic stiffness, not moving a finger.

"Mother, don't be rude. Mr. Enokizu is here at my express invitation."

"I am *well* aware of that."

"What—" the silent doctor finally opened his mouth. For an elderly fellow, his voice was surprisingly high. "What would you have us talk about, Mr. Detective?"

As he spoke, his body leaned to one side, and he pulled back his jaw—the habits of an old man.

"As you can see, we've been quite abandoned. Not that the clinic would be open today anyway—it's our day off. We've no new patients. And our nurses commute, so only one is here now. Our one current occupant is a woman due to give birth. I'm more of a midwife than a doctor. Feh," he snorted with self-derision, then began to laugh loudly.

"That is hardly something to say to outsiders," his wife said harshly, cutting off his laughter. She still hadn't moved a finger.

"Who cares? It's the truth. I've got time to spare. I'll answer your questions, Mr. Detective."

Enokizu grinned, and spoke before the doctor's wife could interrupt again. "This is quite a large clinic you have here—a hospital, really. And yet you only handle obstetrics and gynecology?"

"Heh, don't be deceived by appearances. Before the war we did surgery, internal medicine, pediatrics, all of it. But you see, we lost all of our doctors in the war. And then the bombs came. Just about everything in the area was flattened—"

The old man narrowed his already narrow eyes, burying them deeper in the thick flesh of his face. "They dropped incendiaries on the houses, started lots of fires. But the Americans must have gotten some bad intelligence—seems they thought our hospital was a military facility. They dropped *explosives* on us. Two out of our three buildings were hit. The outsides are still standing, but inside they're pretty much gutted—completely unusable. And we couldn't exactly fix them. What could anyone do in the years after the war? Not much, that's what. So they remain to this day. It was all we could do to fix our living quarters and the one building where damage was light—that's the hall you came through today."

"Why choose obstetrics and gynecology, rather than surgery or internal medicine?"

"The Kuonji family has practiced obstetrics for generations," his wife responded coldly.

The doctor snorted. "Oh, I started out as a surgeon. But you'd take up obstetrics, too, if the alternative was unemployment. That and undertaking are the only two lines of work safe from a recession."

He laughed out loud again. His wife did not stop him this time, choosing to merely glare. When he had finished, she continued. "From 1717 until the time of the restoration, the doctors of the Kuonji household were the trusted physicians of a certain feudal lord. He took us under his wing when a Kuonji safely delivered his heir after a difficult pregnancy."

"A lord from Shikoku, wasn't it?"

"Sanuki."*

"By the way, do you ever go on family trips?"

*A feudal-era province on the island of Shikoku.

Taken aback by Enokizu's non sequitur, Mrs. Kuonji swallowed whatever it was she had been about to say and gave him a curious look.

It was the doctor who answered, "Not since the war ended. I think the last time we went anywhere was in '40 or thereabouts. I remember it being a difficult time—everyone was thrift-minded because of the war with China. As I recall we went to the hot springs in Hakone."

"Do you remember this trip, ma'am?" Enokizu asked, turning to Ryoko. She frowned. "I—"

"She never went on our trips," her father broke in. "She's too weak. Sadly, she was obliged to stay home."

"Forgive the intrusion, but where exactly is your daughter sick?"

"Where? Well, everywhere, I suppose. She has a weak constitution, you might say. There's a small defect in her heart, and she's prone to asthmatic attacks. Exercise is strictly forbidden, and her skin is too weak to stand the sun for long. Her nerves suffer from some dysfunction... It's unusual to see her as healthy as this, honestly." The doctor—her father—gave the dire account as if he were talking about the weather.

I looked at Ryoko with mixed feelings. Her eyes were dark.

"I might die at any moment," she said abruptly.

"Right," said Enokizu. "I think that's enough small chat for now. My able assistant has some questions for you. Seki, if you would."

Enokizu had wasted time with his random inquiries, leaving me to do the heavy lifting. I didn't see any option but to step in and cover for the irresponsible detective.

I first asked about the night of the vanishing—all the while wondering if that was even the case we were here to discuss.

"The original residence—where my wife and I, and Ryoko here, live—is still mostly destroyed. Oh, we repaired what we could, but that wasn't much, and it wasn't particularly spacious to begin with. We didn't think it proper to ask a young couple to live there with us, so we renovated the old pediatrics ward and let them stay there. I'm sure Ryoko will show you around the place later, and as you'll find, it's some distance from here. You could probably fire off a cannon in there and we wouldn't hear it. So we knew nothing of what happened until Kyoko came to us the morning after."

"What did she tell you then?"

"Not much. All she said was that there'd been a fight between her and Makio, and he'd shut himself in the room and not come out. So I told her if he wanted to make a fool of himself, we should let him."

"And you were of the same opinion, ma'am?"

"Kyoko never talks to me about these things. I knew nothing about it until I saw Tokizo and Naito heading toward the annex with some large tools in hand—hammers and so forth."

"Tokizo was an employee we had living with us until spring of last year," Ryoko added by way of explanation.

"So, you heard no strange noises? No sounds of a fight?"

"Oh, I assure you, if I had, I would have sorted matters out myself. There'd certainly be no need for a detective!" the lady Kuonji scoffed.

I felt her bile directed toward us; yet as she spoke, she stared straight ahead, without so much as a glance at me or Enokizu.

I had run out of questions.

"Um..." At last, Atsuko, the supposedly more-able-than-I assistant, joined the fray. "What do the two of you think about all this? What do you believe?" Her gaze shifted between the director and his wife.

"What do I think? Why, I think it's quite clear what's going on," the lady of the house replied. This time she was staring straight at Atsuko. "That man has cursed our family!"

"Excuse me? Cursed?"

"Yes. He bears some unjust ill will toward our house, and married into the family to promote his misdeeds. I'm sure he's off lurking somewhere right now, *watching*, and cursing our poor Kyoko. Oh, and the wicked rumors give him much joy to hear, you can be sure. He is evil. Evil! It's the only explanation." She practically shook with rage as she finished. Then, unexpectedly, she shot her daughter a withering look.

"Do you have any idea why he would harbor ill will toward your family?"

"I..." the woman turned to Atsuko again, her face betraying surprise. Then, after a quick glance back at Ryoko, she spoke more softly than before. "I wouldn't know. I said it wasn't just. There doesn't have to be a reason. In any case, what other explanation can there be for someone disappearing from his room like smoke, unless it's some kind of stage trick—or black magic?"

"I don't agree," the old man said, cutting off his wife. "There's nothing strange in this world, see."

I stiffened involuntarily at those all-too-familiar words.

"I am a doctor, after all. I don't believe in spells and ghosts. People die, and that's that. Nothing happens that isn't physically possible. Which, I believe, gives us our answer."

"And what answer is that?"

"Think about it. No one could leave that room without opening the door. So, if he was inside at all, he must have opened the door and left. In other words, the testimony that he *didn't* open the door was a lie. It's the most obvious explanation."

"But Kyoko was in the next room, correct?"

"Must I spell this out for you?"

"How dare you cast aspersions on your own daughter in front of these people!" his wife interrupted, her temper flaring again. "Have you no shame?"

And besides, it was Naito and Tokizo who told us the room had been locked from the inside!"

"So maybe they were in cahoots. Why not? I wasn't there. I didn't see that door. Neither did you."

"Stop it, please, both of you," Ryoko burst out. She had been watching her parents with a frown for some time now, and it seemed she'd finally had enough. For a brief moment, there was quiet in the drawing room.

It was Atsuko who broke the silence. "Do you have some basis for believing that this man Naito and your daughter Kyoko would conspire in this way?"

"No, no. I am just saying that's the only logical explanation. One plus one is always two. Now I don't know whether Kyoko and Naito conspired and did something to Makio, or whether it was Makio trying to hide something he had done. That's all conjecture, and I'm not so rash as to do that."

"Had you known the two had a falling out?" I asked, finally coming up with a suitably detective-like question.

"Well, Makio was always a quiet lad. I didn't know much about their personal lives. And if you're talking about marital spats, well I daresay we've had our fair share of those ourselves."

"I knew," the doctor's wife offered. "Not that Kyoko ever said anything about it. I pity the child, really. To live such a difficult life, and be cursed on top of it all! We should have just adopted Naito and been done with it." She glared at her husband. "It's your fault."

"This is hardly the time to dredge that up again; and besides, Naito's not even a proper doctor! You'd welcome him into our family? Might as well sell the clinic while you're at it."

According to the old man, Dr. Naito—that is, physician-in-training Naito—had failed the national examinations three times and still lacked a proper license to practice medicine. That would have been fine before the war, when all that was necessary was to have graduated from a medical university, but in September of 1946, the law had changed, and national exams had become mandatory.

"Now Makio, he came to us with full credentials, license and all, as promised. You agreed to the match yourself."

"What do you mean, as promised?" Atsuko asked.

"Ach, it's a long story. You see, the first time he came to ask for Kyoko's hand in marriage was over ten years ago, before the war."

If that were true, then Makio had proposed when he was still a student. It must have happened after I'd delivered the love letter. But I was under the impression that he had gone to Europe half a year before the war in the Pacific started.

I had first visited the clinic the year before he went overseas, in the linger-

ing heat of the summer—probably the end of August or early September. If I was remembering correctly, that meant there had only been seven months or so between when I came and when he proposed. Thinking back on it, I had a hard time imagining that a timid boy who couldn't even deliver his own love letter could summon up the courage to take such decisive action so quickly.

"I remember it was cold outside—probably February or so—when the boy asked to meet with me. He was still a student, you know. He looked as serious as a heart attack when he asked me for Kyoko's hand. Told me he had to marry her, that there was some reason why they must be wed."

"And you gave him permission?"

"If you know a father who would give away his eighteen-year-old daughter to some boy he's only just seen for the first time, I'd like to meet him. No, I turned him away, of course. But he wouldn't leave. I asked him what this reason of his was, and he told me he couldn't say. So I told him if he was serious, he'd better graduate and get a job before coming back. Then he told me he wanted to become a doctor, that he had to go to university to become one, and he couldn't wait that long. I couldn't understand how such a serious-looking young lad could be so blinded by love. So, I told him that a doctor who married my daughter would be carrying on the Kuonji family line. And in order to do that, he would have to meet all sorts of criteria. 'I don't know what kind of talent you may have,' I told him, 'but we need credentials. Study in Europe, or graduating top of your class from university, that sort of thing.'"

"He must have been disappointed."

"Well, in the end, I told him he'd better start by coming back with a doctor's license, and then we'd talk." The old man smirked and scratched his balding head. "Not that I thought much about the family line at the time, or our credentials for that matter—though I'm sure my wife doesn't like to hear me say it. I was just trying to get the boy to go away."

The doctor's wife sat quietly, an almost sorrowful look in her eyes.

"Still, all appearances aside, I myself studied in Germany," he went on. "Preceding generations, too. Germany's been the gold standard in medicine since 1870, after all. That's what I told the boy. I was hoping it would make him give up—and it did hit him hard. To tell the truth, he looked so depressed I started to worry he might do something rash. Imagine my surprise when, a decade later, he came back—carrying a license, no less. And that's not all. Though the war had forced him to return home, he *had* gone to Germany to study.

"At the time, I was completely without a doctor on staff. All our hopes rested on Naito, and he'd failed the exams. Fujino's return changed matters somewhat. I think you'd agree, were you in my position. After I had told the boy all those things just to make him go away, he had taken it to heart, and actually done it, down to the letter."

Was it possible for a man to dedicate himself so thoroughly to a course of action for ten years over something as trifling as a high school crush? The old man had only meant to send the young suitor away, and instead had sent him all the way to Germany. Fujimaki had done more than that, too. He had also kept his promise to me.

—*In the unlikely event that she does reply, I will go to her myself...as a man.*

So the reply had come. And he'd come here, as a man, to show his determination to marry the girl.

A determination that had lasted him a decade.

The thought made me sad.

"Your sentimental foolishness ruined our daughter's life. That's what happened." The lady of the house was again staring straight forward, her words tinged with venom.

Ryoko Kuonji sat quietly looking down at the floor. *And she wants to patch this family together*, I told myself. *A family without a single word of comfort for one another, a family breaking apart.* Once, I was sure, they had formed a solid unit like any other family, sharing a warm, welcoming home.

Or had they?

A nasty thought surfaced in the back of my mind.

What kind of warm, loving household could produce a girl like the one I had met at the hospital entrance the first time I'd been here? No, something *was* wrong with these people. Had been from the beginning. What girl raised by loving parents would do *something like that*?

Was Fujimaki really in love with the girl Kyoko? Had he really dedicated his life to her, a creature who could flash a complete stranger a wanton smile, could make a pass at a younger boy, even as her monthly blood trickled down her leg? Unless...unless that entire experience had been some illusory reality—a delusion only I had suffered.

"Makio must've had some very important reason to dedicate himself so completely to this marriage proposal—"

Atsuko was speaking the question I most wanted to ask, though since she had not seen what I had, her motivation for asking must have been somewhat different.

"Could it have been something as simple as coveting the clinic's fortunes?"

The old doctor laughed out loud. "Don't be ridiculous, young lady. Look around you. What fortunes do you see? We might have been something before the war, but now, we're living in poverty." He chuckled wryly. "In any case, Fujino—that is, Makio—brought his own money with him when he came."

"Brought his own money?"

"Yep. A whole five million yen, what's more. I was sure surprised."

"You didn't have to tell them the amount!" his wife scolded him.

It was an outrageous sum. I had trouble imagining a man who would give himself to another family when his own fortune surely surpassed theirs.

"How did he come by such a large amount?"

The old man looked at us with upturned eyes and an almost petulant frown. He snorted. "That's the problem with detectives. They're always looking for crimes where none are to be found." Then he laughed so hard, his whole frame shook. "It's nothing sinister. He comes from a wealthy family out in Yamanashi. The war took most of them, and he ended up inheriting a rather large mountain. He sold all the land dirt-cheap, but it was still worth a tidy sum. When he came, he brought it all with him."

As he caught his breath his merriment seemed to subside into suspicion. A challenge rose in his eyes. "What? You wondering why we still live like this with all that money?"

I was unsure how to respond. For a moment the doctor's expression was darkly serious beneath his gleaming bald pate; but then he laughed again. "Well, we used it up! Fixing the clinic burned through all that in short order. Isn't that right?" He turned to his wife, expecting her to back him up, but she turned away as if she couldn't be bothered. I wondered how much of what he'd said was true. Atsuko must've been wondering the same thing, for she shot me a troubled look.

Suddenly, Enokizu opened his mouth. "Does this have anything to do with the case?" His question was rather pointed, and for a moment there was nothing but startled silence in the room.

"No—no, I suppose it doesn't," the doctor said after a pause. "We were just reminiscing—or complaining, if you like. Wouldn't you say so, Mrs. Head Administrator?"

Again the old man turned to his ill-tempered partner, searching for some sort of support, but she merely sat in pale-faced silence.

I wondered if the money Fujimaki had brought with him had something to do with what had happened. I had never built a house of my own, so I had nothing to go by in guessing how much it would cost to restore a structure like the Kuonji Clinic. Still, it didn't look so well repaired as to have cost a whole five million.

"Perhaps we should be getting on?" Ryoko said quietly.

"You'll want to have a look at the scene, eh? Yes, I suppose there is no point in us rambling on any further. It's high time you examined the physical facts, Mr. Detective. And besides, I'm a little fatigued. Ryoko, be a dear and show them to the other building—"

The old man stood up before his daughter could answer.

"One last thing before you go," Enokizu said, stopping him. Both Atsuko and I held our breaths, waiting to hear what the detective would say next.

"When you went to Hakone, where did you stay?"

This, surely, was the non sequitur to end all non sequiturs. The old doctor stood in stunned silence for a moment, but when he answered the ridiculous question it was in all seriousness.

"We always stay at the Sengokuro Inn when we go to Hakone. It's been there since Edo times. Though we've not been there lately."

After her parents had left us, Ryoko Kuonji led the party toward the scene of Fujimaki's absconding, or his disappearance, as the case might be.

According to her explanation, the building accessed by the clinic's main entrance was the oldest structure in the complex, appropriately called the "old building." It had been built toward the end of the last century. The residential quarters where we had just met the elder Kuonjis were attached by a walkway to the western side of the old building. In order to go to the site of the mystery, we had to first return to the old building, then pass through the annex on its eastern side and from there move into the "new building." Though the latter had been built two decades before the war, it was relatively speaking the modern structure. The old building, annex, and new building were connected by a single long corridor that ran through them in a straight line. Between each of the buildings on either side of the corridor were small courtyards, filled with bristling shrubs and trees. It was clear at a glance that no groundskeeper had been on staff in quite some time.

The stone construction of the hallways reminded me somewhat of a church, or perhaps it was a mausoleum—our single file the funeral procession.

The interior of the annex hadn't been restored at all, from the looks of it. Even from the hallway, I could see holes in the ceiling, and giant cracks running down the walls.

"The annex is mostly in ruins. Half of the rooms in the new building are still intact, though. That's where Naito and our servants—they're not here right now—have been living. Makio's laboratory is also in the new building."

"Was Makio doing some kind of research?"

"Yes, he was quite passionate about it, though I confess I do not know what he was researching."

Ryoko spoke with a distracted air, as though her mind were somewhere else. Then, as if the idea had just come to her, she turned around and asked if we would like to meet with Naito.

I had been enjoying the view of her walking, from behind, so when she turned I hurriedly diverted my gaze to the courtyard. White flowers were blooming among the tufts of tall grass. It looked as if the bushes on which they grew, alone among all the vegetation, had been well trimmed, and they

caught the eye dramatically. It was a little too far to see clearly, what sort of flowers they were.

The unusually high ceiling in the first-floor hall of the new building came complete with a ragged, gaping hole, maybe where a bomb had come falling through. I guessed that it went all the way up through the other floors; a few rays of slanting afternoon sun spilled down from above, casting streaks of light through the dim interior. Again my impression changed—this wasn't a mausoleum, but a Gothic chapel, in which we'd come to pray.

We climbed up the staircase—unusually ornate for a hospital—and reached the second floor. As I had imagined, the ceiling here, too, had a hole in it, right above the gaping hole in the floor. We walked up to the edge.

"Wow, they really did a number on this place, didn't they?" Enokizu said stupidly, and Ryoko Kuonji nodded, a sad glimmer in her eyes that, I thought, reflected memories of what her home had once been.

"Oh, Ryoko! Are these the detectives you were talking about?" The heavy voice came from the far side of the large hole. A tall man with a tanned, determined face was standing across the hall from us.

Ryoko turned toward him, favoring him with a brief glance before saying, "That's Naito." Then she turned away again, her face settling into its habitual pained expression.

The man—Dr. Naito—ambled around the hole toward us, his shoes scuffing the floor.

"I saw you coming in from up here. You surprised me—I must have spent all morning wondering what sort of chap the detective would turn out to be, but you've all confounded my every assumption."

Naito's voice sounded too loud in the spacious hall.

The new building was half-destroyed on its western side—the side closest to the annex—but the eastern side was virtually unscathed. Naito had been given a room there on the second floor.

For a hospital room, it was rather large with unusually high-quality decor and furnishings. The view from the window wasn't bad either.

"Yeah, they said this room was for patients in critical condition, but mostly the rich old farts would claim it. Some people think a hospital ward is some kind of vacation home," Naito rambled on as he led us inside.

His eyes were wide, and rather bloodshot. Patches of stubble framed the crooked frown of his mouth. What had looked like an expression of determination from a distance now appeared to be the collected detrimental effects of an irregular lifestyle. Naito was about my age, or slightly younger. It occurred to me that he might even be far younger than I.

We sat in the chairs he offered us, and Naito sat on his bed. "Well, what

can I do for you?" he asked cheerfully.

Ignoring Enokizu, Atsuko asked the first question. "Were you here on the night of the incident?"

"Well, I'm not sure what you mean by 'incident,' but if you're talking about the night of the big fight between the young doctor and Kyoko, then yes, I was here."

"You don't agree there was an incident?"

"I thought 'incident' was a term usually reserved for when someone gets killed, or something gets stolen. In our case, the young doctor simply disappeared, that's all."

"But you can't rule out the possibility of an, ah, incident—nor the possibility that some crime was involved—when someone has disappeared."

"Oh, a crime was committed, all right—in fact, it's being committed right now." Naito sat lower in his bed, spreading his knees. There was an unspoken challenge in his eyes.

"Pardon? Would you care to explain what you mean by that?"

Naito smiled faintly and pulled a cigarette from the pocket of his disheveled scrubs, tucking it into one corner of his mouth. "The doctor disappeared, yes; but I'm afraid you are all under the mistaken impression that he is the victim. He's not. He's the *perpetrator*. Nothing unusual about a criminal going into hiding, is there?"

"What are you claiming Makio has done?" Ryoko asked, an unusually harsh tone in her voice. "I'll not have you slandering him like this without proof."

Naito narrowed his eyes as he looked at Ryoko, and his thin smile curled slightly upward. "May I ask, what better proof could possibly exist than your sister's condition? That is no common malaise she suffers."

Ryoko glared at him in silence.

Naito turned away from her then, facing Atsuko and me as he continued. "Let me be frank. That man used Kyoko as a subject—a human guinea pig—for his inhumane experiments. He used her—and then he disappeared."

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"Revenge. His relationship with Kyoko had cooled to the point of freezing. Which isn't to suggest it had ever been anything more than lukewarm to begin with. But the conflict escalated day by day, until it became all-out war. Pardon me for saying this, but Kyoko is a rather temperamental girl, and that frail genius of a doctor just couldn't handle her. It must have been a living hell for the man. The two of them hated each other something fierce. They both fought, they both lost, and you really can't blame either of them for that. But he wanted to win—to settle the score in a most unthinkably horrible way."

"That's completely unfounded—not a stitch of truth to it! My sister waits with all her heart for the day when Makio shall return. Kyoko never—"

"I don't know what she's told you, ma'am, but I doubt it was the truth," Naito said in a loud voice, interrupting Ryoko's rush of denial. "My good detectives, would you be so kind as to look out that window there? You see that low building just outside? That's the old infant ward—that was the couple's residence."

I hadn't been able to see it sitting down, but when I stood and went over to the window, there was the roof of the other building.

"When the sash is open, if someone down there is shouting you can hear them as clearly as if they were right here in the room with you. I heard them fighting just about every day."

"That day as well?"

"Yes, that day was worse than most."

Naito stood and strolled over to the window. He gazed down at the building as he spoke. "Kyoko was in hysterics. I half-thought I should go try to stop them, but, uh..." He looked around and grinned. "Nothing's as rancid as a marital fight."

"It must've been quite a frightening experience for you," Enokizu said suddenly.

"Excuse me? Experience? I'm not sure I understand."

"I mean—Kyoko looked quite terrible. And then there was—"

"Hold on a second. Is this that 'leading questioning' one hears about? I was here, Mr. Detective, not there. I told you I *heard* them fighting. How could I know what they looked like?"

Naito was clearly flustered. Enokizu had *seen* something. Atsuko must have realized it too, for she stood there as silent as I was; we held our breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Yet what seemed at first like a promising line of attack soon veered toward the incomprehensible.

"Ah, yes, I see. Tell me, was it Makio who shut the door himself?"

"Door? What door?"

"The door you used that sledgehammer to break down. The door to the library."

Naito's face had gone the color of ash. The edge of his mouth was twitching slightly. "M-Mr. Detective," he stuttered, "You certainly say the queerest things. I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Enokizu stood as still as a statue. *What does he see with those faded eyes?* I wondered. His wide eyelids were half-closed, and I stared at them, unconsciously waiting for something to happen, some light to spark.

The detective spoke. "So, you believe that Makio is alive?"

"Of course! That's why I want you to find him, as fast as you can! Put an end to his heinous crime!" In the course of a few moments, Naito's expression had gone from one of outrage to one of grief and lament. There was conviction in his latest words, a vehemence that had been lacking from all he'd said before.

"Um, Mr. Naito, what exactly are these human experiments you claim he was performing?" Atsuko asked. "Do you have any details or, er, proof?"

Naito seemed to be regaining his calm; he sat back down on the bed. But his eyes kept moving, darting to look at Enokizu, and I saw fear in them.

"I don't know the specifics, no. But I believe the man was attempting to create a *homunculus*."

"Homunculus? What's that?"

It was I who answered Enokizu's question. "An artificial human—a work of major alchemy. You know, mixing ingredients together in a glass vial to create life. But of course, that's..."

Not science. It's magic.

Naito took up where I left off. "I heard a little of it from the doctor himself, actually. He asked me once whether I thought it was possible to love a child not conceived through intercourse. Quite the question, eh? If you don't believe me, check out his laboratory. He left all of his findings there for anyone to see. *There's your proof.*"

If this was true, it was very disturbing, indeed. I didn't even want to picture my old friend laboring night after night creating monstrosities in his lab like some medieval European sorcerer.

"He also said that he had actually made such a child, but the problem was in attaching the seed that would become a fetus to a woman's uterus."

"So the child in Kyoko's womb is—"

"Not his, that's for sure. How could it be? They certainly never consummated their marriage, not even once."

"Naito! That is quite enough of your wild conjecture!" Ryoko shouted. She had been quiet through his entire story, but now it seemed she had reached her limit and was boiling over. A purple vein in her forehead stood out against the pale white of her skin.

"It's true. I got it straight from Kyoko. If you doubt me, ask her yourself."

"I wouldn't dare repeat such cruel fabrications in front of her! For shame!"

"Crueler still *not* to discuss it, I'd say. This is a very serious matter for her. Though I can see how it would be difficult to talk about such things with family. Kyoko was not so shameless as to complain to her parents of her husband's failure to perform his husbandly duties. And it would be harder still for her to confess such things to someone as close as her sister. But me, I'm an unconnected party—an outsider, even though I live and work within these walls. I was the only one she could talk to. And she desperately needed someone, that's pretty clear. What with that disciplinarian of a mother, her argumentative father, and then you—"

"Enough of this!" Ryoko was trembling. I wanted to say something to defuse the situation, but couldn't think of anything appropriate. It was Enokizu

who next spoke.

"So, then, the child's yours."

Everyone was silent.

"Th-That's ridiculous! What is it with you?"

"Oh, am I wrong?" Enokizu asked, calm and unflappable.

Naito froze.

Ryoko was glaring at him with ferocious intensity. "It's a fact that this is what's going around in the rumors. I believe my sister—but if you truly *are* without guilt, I would like to hear it from you right here." Now it was Miss Kuonji doing the questioning.

"Talk about unfounded slander! Ryoko, you slight your own sister. I am innocent. And besides—" Naito was clearly agitated. His gaze flicked nervously back and forth. A sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. "If that were true..." His eyes darted between Enokizu and Ryoko, then he lowered his head and looked down at the floor. "If that, that child *is* truly mine, why won't it come out?!"

Something was very wrong with the way Naito was acting. I couldn't help but get the impression that, even as he denied it, he *wished* the child were his.

"Say, for the sake of argument, that it is my illegitimate child," he went on. "In the case of a normal pregnancy, a child is born when the mother comes to term. If accusing me of being her lover would neatly explain this whole affair, that would be one thing, but it clearly doesn't! If you've got time to cast aspersions on my affairs, then why don't you spend it looking for the man who committed this horrible crime? Think of Kyoko!"

It was as if a dam had broken; the words had come from his mouth in a flood. When he was finished, he slowly lifted his eyes.

"The way you're talking, Mr. Naito, it sounds as if you're acknowledging an affair," Ryoko said quietly, her gaze on something distant outside the window.

"Think whatever you want," Naito replied, the smile returning incongruously to his face.

The uncomfortable silence that followed was broken by Atsuko's next question.

"You said earlier that Makio had left all of his research. Why haven't you looked at it? Perhaps some cure could be found?"

I had been thinking the same thing. This was a hospital, after all, and even if he didn't have his license, Naito was supposedly a doctor in training. If all of Fujimaki's research data had been left behind, surely some countermeasure could be devised by studying it.

"That's the thing." Naito turned to stare at Atsuko, and his voice rose nearly to a shout. "I can't make heads or tails of it! I am, you may recall, a three-time failure at the national examinations. Oh, I've looked at his note-

books several times over the past year. There are a good fifty of them, you know. I must have read through a third before I realized I wasn't getting anywhere and gave up. He probably knew that would happen, too. Why else would he leave all his research behind when he fled? He just abandoned his notes, knowing in his arrogance that I'd have no hope of deciphering them."

Something in what Naito himself had said set him off, for he grew more and more agitated until by the end he was spluttering right in Atsuko's face.

"What about the director? Wouldn't he understand them?" Atsuko asked warily. She took a step toward me to distance herself from the bedraggled doctor.

"The director? I talked to him, sure. I even showed him the notebooks. But he doesn't believe a thing I say—never has. I don't get any trust from him, no, I get contempt. After all, I did fail the exams. What do I know?"

I had been more or less aware of the director's disdain for Naito from what he had told us in the drawing room himself. Now Naito was confirming it. It was the first fact in this case that everyone seemed to agree on.

"And what did the director say?"

"He told me the research was simple embryology. Nothing unusual. Told me he didn't think that 'upright boy' would engage in the kind of demonic investigations I was suggesting. Basically, he wouldn't give me the time of day. Said I was suffering delusions. That my unrealistic fantasies were the reason I'd failed the exams so many times. That I should forget everything I knew and start back at square one—that would be easier. Blunt as could be."

Naito looked ready to cry.

"I understand what you're trying to say, regardless of the truth of it. Yet, there is one thing—"

Atsuko was practically trembling, and Enokizu was silent as usual, so I'd picked up the slack. There had been something in what Naito said that bothered me.

"Let us say that Makio and Kyoko's relationship had deteriorated beyond any hope of repair. Let us also say that he was, indeed, performing some kind of diabolical research. What I don't understand is, why wouldn't he just file for divorce? I understand he'd been adopted into the family, but in this day and age, it's certainly not unheard of for a man to extricate himself from a bad situation by legal means. I just don't see the need for him to have taken things to such elaborate, bizarre extremes."

Naito was silent.

"Mr. Naito. You told us that Makio wanted 'revenge' on Kyoko. But, frankly, I'm having trouble understanding why you would use such a strong word for the settling of matters between husband and wife. The director's wife said something along the same lines, too—that Makio had an unfounded grudge against the family. Had he met with some misfortune at the hands of

his in-laws, or his wife, that would lead him to seek revenge?"

Naito thought for a while—choosing his words, perhaps. After some time, the delinquent apprentice doctor answered me, his voice considerably lower than before. "I cannot speak for Mrs. Kuonji. As for me, I merely used the word 'revenge' because I couldn't think of a more suitable word. There is no hidden meaning here, Mr. Detective. How about we call it a 'venting of frustrations'? A most dire, despicable venting," he added with a mean-spirited snicker.

"Mean-spirited"—those words summed up my impression of this man perfectly. He was mean-spirited, and he was hiding something, of that much I was sure. The more he denied it, the more transparently false he sounded.

"I see, well..." There had to be something I hadn't asked yet. Something like—"Could you tell me a bit more about the day Makio disappeared?"

Naito glared at me with bloodshot, serpentine eyes, and his lip curled into an ugly smile. "That's right, that's right. It's your job to discern the truth of matters, isn't it, Mr. Detective? That's much preferable to all this groundless conjecture, eh?"

"Around what time was it when you heard the two arguing that night?"

"Oh, I'd say after eleven—a little before midnight, perhaps. The young doctor had been working in his laboratory until then. He arrived in the bedroom to find all hell waiting for him."

"Could you hear what they were saying?"

"I've forgotten most of it, I'm sorry to say. Something about a child, and what to do about an heir, that sort of thing. Kyoko was speaking so, erm, vigorously that I could not hear her clearly—though it was more or less the usual: 'Get out!' 'I wish you were dead!'—that sort of thing. Nothing too coherent. There was the sound of dishes breaking—a bona fide marital spat."

"How long did it go on?"

"Not too long, I suppose. It was quiet by two in the morning if not before then. I fell soundly asleep and remained so until Kyoko came to me the next morning with her face all pale."

"So Kyoko came here in the morning?"

"Right. She was saying something about Makio not coming out."

"And did you immediately go to open the door then?"

"No, I told her to talk to her father first. Makio was his favorite, after all."

"So Kyoko came to you first, before anyone else in the house, to tell you this?"

"Of course she did," Enokizu offered.

Naito continued, seemingly eager to keep Enokizu out of the conversation. "I first visited the scene that afternoon, a little after one. The library door was shut tight, Kyoko was crying, and I really had no idea what to do. It was around then that Tomiko brought us a late lunch."

"Tomiko is Tokizo's wife. She was an employee, too—she lived at the hospital and helped with the cleaning," Ryoko explained.

"Now, it would have been better for Tomiko to keep quiet, but she started going on about how he'd probably hung himself and was surely dangling in there all limp like a fish, which of course just made Kyoko more frantic. She'd been desperate before, sure, but now she was barely controllable. Crying and wailing and all that. So I called Tokizo and we went to get tools from the main building to knock down the door."

"And was it Tokizo who broke it open?"

"I'm afraid I don't recall. We were both going at it. For the shape that it's in, this building is well constructed—especially the door fittings. The locks are incredibly tough, so we had to smash the hinges."

"I believe you dealt the final blow, and you were the one who opened the door," Enokizu said, inserting himself into the conversation.

"L-Like I said, I don't recall. That may have been. Not that it really matters. When we opened the door, no one was inside."

"Who went into the room first?"

"That was Kyoko. I remember her pushing past me to get inside."

"What about Tokizo and his wife?"

"Well, I'm inclined to think they just stood outside, looking," Naito dragged fitfully at his cigarette, then violently stubbed out the butt into an ashtray.

We took our leave of him then and left his room behind.

"You see the sort of man he is," Ryoko said, her expression suggesting that she could barely tolerate Naito's company. "I hear he traces his lineage back to the feudal lord whom the Kuonji family originally served, though apparently he's more of a distant relative than anything else. That sort of thing is very important to Mother, however, and for the longest time she defended him, saying we owed him respect for his family ties if nothing else." She paused. "He...had a rough childhood, I hear. Lost both his parents at a young age. Perhaps that's why he has such an oblique way of looking at things. He's been in our direct service for ten years now, and still, I cannot grow accustomed to the man. I do not like him," she added finally, in a voice so low only I could hear.

I felt my pulse begin to race, though I didn't know why.

At Atsuko's suggestion, we next went to the laboratory. It was located in what was originally the night watchman's room, on the first floor of the new building just below and to one side of Naito's quarters.

I had been picturing a dungeon in an old European castle, complete with steaming beakers and strange contraptions arcing electricity, so I was somewhat taken aback by what we found. I should have known better. After all, the

man using the lab, Fujimaki—that is, Makio Kuonji—was a proper scientist, not some mad alchemist. I decided to blame that word Naito had used, "homunculus," for sending my imagination down unfamiliar paths. Here there were no venomous vermin, no pungent herbs, nor any philosopher's stone that I could see.

A single bookshelf stood against one wall, and next to that, a desk and a chair. There was a rack that held a collection of laboratory dishes and flasks, none of them bubbling. Other than that, it was a sparse, simple room. The bookshelf held a few dozen medical texts, scrapbooks, and the kind of notebooks used for university classes. The notebooks were fastidiously arranged by year, as indicated by the neatly lettered labels on each notebook's spine.

I pulled out one of the notebooks and quickly glanced through it. It was written entirely in German; small, intricate letters marching in orderly rows across the page. I had never been very good at languages as a student, so I gave up after trying to work my way through two or three lines.

We decided to borrow the first three and the last two of the research notebooks, which, if Naito was to be believed, contained the missing doctor's records of his experiments at creating human life. I planned to take them home for further study—though if a doctor in training couldn't make sense of them, I doubted an amateur like myself would get any further.

"Sensei! Journals!"

Atsuko had discovered that the bottom shelf of the bookshelf contained nothing but personal journals, organized by year from right to left.

"He sure was disciplined. Look. There're journals here starting from 1926—"

In 1926 Fujimaki still would have been just a child. I wondered at the kind of dedicated mind that could keep up writing a journal, apparently without skipping a day, for so long—over twenty years. I grabbed the journal from the left side of the shelf. The newest one.

Most of the pages were blank.

My hands trembled. If the pages were blank, didn't that mean this was the last journal?

"Ryoko!"

In my excitement, I called Ryoko Kuonji by her given name. It was the first time I had called her this to her face. "Do you know the exact date when Makio disappeared?"

For a moment, the woman seemed flustered to hear me speak so familiarly, but she soon composed herself and answered, "It was last year—nineteen fifty-one. January eighth, nineteen fifty-one. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say, before dawn on the ninth of January."

I glanced at the last date in the journal.

January 8, 1951

The day of his disappearance.

My heart beat loud in my ears—though I wasn't sure whether it was because I had found a journal entry for the very day of Fujimaki's disappearance, or because I'd said "Ryoko" out loud in Miss Kuonji's presence.

Nothing appealed to me less at that moment than reading that page, and in any case Kyogokudo had said something about the earlier journals being more important, so in the end, we decided to borrow them all. Ryoko hesitated at first, unsure of whether it was appropriate for her to loan out someone else's very private property, even under these circumstances. But we stressed the potential importance of such evidence for our investigation, and in the end, she acquiesced.

Atsuko, having come prepared for just this occasion, produced a length of twine from her bag and neatly tied the journals and research notes into a large bundle.

Useless as ever, Enokizu busied himself fiddling with the flasks on the rack, all the while praising Atsuko for her foresight, muttering almost incomprehensible things like "I knew you were better than monkey-man" and "you think ahead while he stinks ahead"—until he suddenly shouted at the top of his voice, causing everyone in the room to whirl around.

"Look! Dead mice!"

He was pointing at a glass box that held several tiny white corpses.

"I had no idea they were there." Ryoko frowned. "Perhaps Makio was raising them? That's too bad. If I'd known, I would have at least kept them fed."

"Nobody knew these mice were here?" Enokizu asked.

"No... Well, I think the only person ever to come in here was Naito."

"So these mice must've died quite a while back. You would think they'd be only bones. But look. They aren't decayed in the least, as if they only passed away a few days ago. Maybe Mr. Na-what's-his-name was feeding them?" Enokizu raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

Toward the back of the box there appeared to be several more specimens, soaked in alcohol.

"Look at all those mice. Rats!"

Why does Enokizu have to be so maddeningly vapid, I wondered, and not for the first time. Perhaps because I was rather excited myself, his behavior right then annoyed me more than usual. "Who cares about some mice? I think we've got enough from this room. Maybe we should be moving on." I felt like time was running out. I wanted to get to the scene of the disappearance—of the crime, perhaps.

"You'd just abandon the mystery of the mice?" Enokizu seemed fascinated by the rodents, but in the end, we ignored his minority opinion and decided to turn our attention elsewhere.

"You can see the building where my sister and her husband lived from this window, too." Ryoko pointed. Though we had only been able to peer down on the ward roof from Naito's room, the laboratory faced the other building directly. I had been too absorbed with what we'd found in the lab to notice. Now as I looked I saw that heavy curtains hung in the old ward's windows, blocking our view of the inside.

Crossing the hallway in front of the laboratory and turning to the right brought us to a corridor that led out of the new building. I opened the glass exit door and found it unexpectedly hot outside.

The place where it had all happened was right before us now, just across a small patch of bare ground. The old ward was a small structure, but built of solid stone, and the window boards and the design of the doors bespoke the building's age. Behind it grew a small wood.

"This building is older than the annex. The Kuonji family have been obstetricians since feudal days, and the next field they moved into was infant care," Ryoko explained. "Before the annex and new building were built, there was just the main building and, across a large garden, the infant ward. Two buildings alone on all this land."

Just inside the ward's entrance we found a ragged old sofa and table. There was a strong smell of disinfectant. A small window that must have once provided customer access to the reception desk was now closed, hidden behind a thin white curtain. Perhaps because it had been so hot outside, inside the building it felt chilly, almost cold.

"Would you like to meet Kyoko? Or maybe—"

"Please show us the building first," I said, eager to delay the climax of our visit.

Neither Atsuko nor Enokizu protested.

"As you've probably realized, this used to be the reception area." It was a large room, with three doors leading further into the building. Ryoko opened the leftmost door. "This is the big room—the communal ward." I peered in and saw eight child-sized beds in two rows along the sides of the room. The beds lay covered in pure white sheets, like the palls placed on coffins. A white curtain hanging from the ceiling blocked off the large windows in one wall; the sunlight diffused through it filled the entire space with a soft white glow. There was a thin layer of dust on the floor, deep enough that anyone who entered the room would be sure to leave footprints.

"As you can see, this room is currently unused." Ryoko left the door open and walked over to stand by the next door. "This is where the smaller wards are." She opened it, revealing a dimly lit hallway.

Three doors were evenly spaced down the left side of the hallway. The right side was bare, save for a single oil painting hanging midway down. The hallway ended in what appeared to be a rear exit door, set with a single pane of glass through which bright light spilled from outside.

Ryoko opened the first door. It led to a small hospital room with two beds. Everything here, too, was white and unused. A layer of dust covered the floor, evidence that no one had entered in some time.

Ryoko noticed me looking at the dust. "No one's cleaned these rooms since it became difficult for Kyoko to move around."

The next room was exactly the same as the first. The third door led to the washroom; Enokizu announced he had to answer a call of nature and went swiftly in to do his business. He'd been holding it for a while, it seemed.

The rest of us returned to the waiting room.

"In there is the examination room—the couple's bedroom," Ryoko said, indicating the door next to the small reception window on the right. I could feel the tension rise in me as she placed her hand on the doorknob. But just then Enokizu reappeared, shaking droplets of water from his hands, and loudly announced, "Good news! Someone's been cleaning the privy at least." My nervousness melted away in an instant.

Ryoko opened the door.

The room on the other side was about as large as the waiting room. Immediately to the right of the doorway was the other side of the small reception window; beneath that sat a table, though there was no chair. A faded carpet covered the floor in the middle of the room, atop which rested a bed—clearly not standard hospital issue, judging from the ornate bedposts. The bed had no sheets or blankets, however, and even lacked a mattress. The place felt like someone's house right after the movers have come and gone.

"Ever since Kyoko's condition developed, she's been in the next room—the archive, where Makio disappeared. No one uses this room anymore." Ryoko picked up a flower vase from the top of the table next to the window.

The vase was empty.

There were three windows and a built-in medicine cabinet on the side of the room facing the main approach to the building. An oil painting hung on the wall adjacent the waiting room, and beneath that sat an old-looking chest with carved wooden legs. The opposite wall was all windows, stretching nearly from floor to ceiling and covered by another of those long white curtains. From the orientation of the room, I guessed that these were the windows we had seen from the new building across the way.

"Ah ha, that's it!" Enokizu said, sounding pleased. "This room and the big room we were in are placed symmetrically around the waiting room, yes?" Then, "So this is where the tragedy took place."

I blinked. "Tragedy? You mean the marital spat?"

Enokizu walked up to the bed. "I suppose you could call it that, yes. Right, right. So he's on the bed, here. And the husband comes in—"

Enokizu crouched in front of the bed.

"What do you mean 'he'? Who was on the bed?"

"You know, that guy we were just talking to. Uchida, was it? Or Saito—the emotionally unstable fellow."

Apparently, he was talking about Naito.

"Naito was in this room? On this bed? When do you mean?" Atsuko asked, kneeling next to Enokizu and peering at him quizzically.

"Oh, it's not the sort of thing I could tell you, Atsu. Far too shocking." Enokizu shuffled over to a window, his hospital slippers slapping against the floor; then he turned to take in the entire space. He began to move along the edge of the room, stopping in front of the door through which we had entered. "I see, yes. Here, he tried to run away."

It was all we could do to contain our surprise as we watched his performance. He began walking sideways along the wall, like a crab, then abruptly slumped to the floor near the oil painting. "And here, he collapsed."

I had had about enough of this, and I strode up to Enokizu, my voice rising almost to a shout. "Hey, Eno! Mind telling us what happened in a way we can comprehend? When did this take place? Who was here?"

He ignored me. "Ah yes. Blood." He pointed toward the edge of the carpet. "Huh?"

Leaving the detective slumped against the wall, the three of us hurried to the spot he was pointing at. The edge of the carpet there was indeed stained black.

"Could this really be...blood?" Atsuko pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and, covering her hand with it, lightly took hold of the edge of the carpet and warily peeled it up from the floor.

A dark stain had spread out beneath it.

"It certainly *looks* like blood."

Ryoko looked pale. "But whose blood? And why? How come we never noticed this before?"

"Because somebody neatly cleaned up every last trace of it from the rest of the floor," Enokizu said pleasantly. "They must have been in a hurry, though, because they seem to have missed the blood that soaked into the carpet. Nor did they notice when it started leaking back out and staining the floor underneath. I suppose the dark weave of the carpet made it hard to see, and you really have to look at it from this angle in order to notice..." He was still sitting on the floor beneath the painting. "And you knew nothing of this, young miss?"

"Of course not!" Ryoko replied, her eyes never leaving the black stain. The revelation was clearly a great shock to her.

"So whose blood is it?" Atsuko asked.

"Why, it belongs to the vanished Mr. Makio," Enokizu replied, matter-of-factly.

"Wait, Eno. Are you saying Makio was killed here?"

Enokizu pressed his hands against the floor, pushing himself up to stand. He quickly patted the dust off his trousers. "I didn't say he was killed. I just said it was his blood." Then, after a moment's thought, he announced happily, "This, however, has absolutely nothing to do with our case."

"What you mean it has nothing to do with our case? What did you come here to do, anyway, Eno? Have you forgotten our client's request?"

At this point I had completely lost my temper.

"Of course not. You say the strangest things sometimes," Enokizu said, his face betraying genuine amazement. I looked away.

"This young lady came to us asking to know what had become of Makio, yes? If he still lived, she wanted to know why he had vanished. Isn't that right?"

Ryoko, too astonished to speak, merely nodded her head.

"Right," I asserted. "So this has everything to do with our case."

"How come? She didn't ask us what happened here, did she? And as there is no body here, we can safely say that Makio *left* this room, so it seems to me that the question is not what happened here, but what happened *after he left*. Regardless of whatever drama took place here, it is merely one of many events that occurred before he vanished, Seki. Which is why we really have no business looking any further into it whatsoever." Then, with a sad look, he added, "In fact, we shouldn't have talked to the family at all. I regret it now."

"But we had to talk to them in order to find out what happened!"

"Why's that?"

"Isn't it obvious? How can you investigate if you don't ask people what happened? You can't find out the doctor's motives for vanishing without that—and that's clearly one of the things we were asked to do."

"Seki, didn't I tell you? I don't do investigations. I do conclusions."

This was certainly true. Enokizu was anything but a typical detective. I had run out of things to say.

"In any case, Seki, you're incorrect. This young lady only asked us to discover his motives were he still alive. In other words, if he happens to be dead, we don't care what his motives were. Isn't that right, erm..."

"Yes, that was my request, Mr. Enokizu," Ryoko replied, before the detective could come up with her name.

"See? That's why I took the case. I don't care to waste time conjecturing about something as vague as somebody's feelings. If the man's alive, we'll catch him and ask him why he left to his face. All we need concern ourselves with now is finding out what became of him."

"But Eno, you *saw* something, didn't you?" I asked, stepping closer to him and attempting to summon up what intimidating presence I could muster. "I heard from Kyogokudo. I know what you can see."

Enokizu's face went blank.

"If you saw something important that happened here, tell us. Even if it has nothing to do with the case!"

Enokizu was silent for a while. Then, suddenly, he said, "If you must know, Seki, I saw a frog."

"Huh?"

"Yes. A frog's face...on a human infant."

The instant the words had left Enokizu's mouth, Ryoko staggered.

"Ryoko!" I shouted, but Atsuko had already caught her. It seemed that Miss Kuonji had been supporting her fragile body through sheer force of will, and now that will was stretched as thin as a thread of silk. Enokizu stared at her. "Yes. A frog," he muttered. He looked down at the floor. "There are things in this world one *shouldn't* see, you know, Seki?"

Then he was silent. Atsuko helped Ryoko to a small chair in the corner of the room. Her eyes had gone empty, twin pools of void. Atsuko stood beside her attentively. I felt horribly flustered, though I could not have said why.

After a long moment Ryoko rubbed at her temples in pain; then she forced a smile and nodded to Atsuko. "Thank you. I felt dizzy for a moment there—but I'm all right now." Her noh-mask expression returned, and she looked up at Enokizu, saying in a thin voice, "Mr. Enokizu, you see things that are not of this world, don't you?"

"No. I only see things of this world, actually."

Ryoko smiled then, or so it seemed to me. "Including a baby with the face of a frog?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Do you know what happened here that night?"

"I know what the man we spoke to saw here, but I don't know why, and I don't know how it ended."

The wax figures were talking. My confusion quickly distilled into a feeling of ostracization. I couldn't stand being left out of this, not now. "Tell me what you saw! Did Makio die?"

Whatever spell had come over Enokizu broke then, and he looked at me with a faint grin. "No, he didn't die. Not here, at any rate. After all, he did go into the next room and shut that big old door behind him."

Enokizu pointed.

I looked, and there in the wall he'd indicated was a dark, heavy door.

"Is that—"

"Yes," Ryoko said, standing and walking over to it. "This is the library—which is to say, the archive. Originally it was an operation room, where first aid and simple procedures were performed. It was from there that Makio disappeared—if we are to believe my sister's story." Saying this, Ryoko looked at me.

The door to the archive was made of extremely sturdy wood—the kind of door that a large man could hurl himself against and not budge. The construction was solid, with barely a hair's width of gap on any side. I noticed that the broken hinges had been expertly repaired.

"So the question is, what happened after he went in here, Mr. Enokizu?"

"Yes, that's been the problem from the start—figuring that out. And I'm no closer to understanding it now than I was when I began. Why? Because I haven't been inside that room. We've been here over an hour now, and the only one who thinks we've made any progress at all is you, Seki."

Enokizu laughed, and I was considering a suitable retort when Atsuko spoke from the floor in front of the door, where she had knelt to take a closer look. "The door can't be locked from this side?"

"It cannot. Actually, the lock is more like a little drawbar. It can neither be opened nor closed from outside the room."

The metal of the doorknob was deeply scored in several places, probably from when Naito and the handyman had tried to pry it open.

Atsuko pulled a notebook from her handbag, tore off a piece of paper, and began trying to slide it between the door and the frame at various points. There wasn't even enough of a gap for that. Common doors tend to be installed with a large space at the bottom to allow them to swing above small obstructions on the floor, but here, too, the door was tight in the opening, fitting against the threshold like a piece of parquetry; the paper merely bent against it until Atsuko despaired and gave up.

"I can't even get a single piece of paper through. I guess that rules out tricks with thread and the like," our able detective's assistant announced, crumpling the paper in her hand.

I gathered my thoughts before speaking. "That's fine, but most modern crimes don't rely on the kinds of tricks you see in detective novels. In the vast majority, there is a duplicate key, or something equally mundane. But, with a drawbar, there is no such thing as a duplicate key—so if someone did get out of there, it's not likely he left by this door."

Atsuko's face betrayed a touch of dissatisfaction. "*Sensei*, in the first place, this door had a living lock on it—Kyoko Kuonji. As long as her testimony holds, Makio couldn't have come out this way no matter what trick he pulled. Even with the door unlocked, the room was effectively sealed."

"So what do you think happened?"

"Well, what if he never went into the room in the first place?" Atsuko lifted an eyebrow. "It's a classic mystery novel contradiction: a murdered man found in a sealed room. But, in the books, there's always a simple answer—a way of getting in and out—and once you find that, the contradiction ceases to be a contradiction, and the sealed room is unsealed."

"Of course, our case is different in that we don't have a body. Apparently there was no sign of our missing person remaining in the room at all. This means there are three possible explanations. The first is that he found some other means to leave the room. The second is that he actually disappeared via some supernatural means, and the third is that he was never in the room in the first place."

"So you think Kyoko's testimony was false?"

"That's not necessarily the case. Consider our three basic assumptions: Makio was in the room, the room was locked from the inside, and when the door was finally opened no one was there. We have evidence to support these assumptions, namely Kyoko's testimony for the first, and for the latter two, the testimony of Kyoko, Naito, and Tokizo. But only when we believe all of the assumptions does the mystery become a mystery."

A thoughtful look came to Atsuko's eyes as she brushed her hand against the door. "I hardly need to point out that a person disappearing from a sealed room contradicts some pretty basic laws of physics. Before we think about how he could've gotten out, I think we need to determine whether our contradiction really is a contradiction. Let's suppose for a moment that people are lying, as the director implied. That would solve our mystery quite readily. But it would also leave us trying to figure out the motive, among other things."

"Now, let's consider whether just one liar among the three would resolve our contradiction. If it were Naito or Tokizo alone who lied, we wouldn't have a sealed room. But with Kyoko it's a little different—"

"Right. Her testimony—"

"—is the sole evidence that Makio had entered the archive to begin with. Still, this only creates a mystery if it really wasn't possible to lock the door from the outside. If it *was* possible, then all she had to do was lock the door on an empty room before calling Naito and the others. In that case, neither Naito nor the handyman would have had to lie to create our basic contradiction—no human being where there was supposed to be one. That was indeed our third possible explanation, that Makio was never in the room."

"There is still the possibility that one of the men, either Naito or Tokizo, conspired with Kyoko. But you would still need a way to lock the room from the outside."

"Oh, the eloquence of your oration! The rigidity of your logic! You are truly your brother's sister!" Enokizu interrupted. Indeed, her explanation was clear enough that halfway through, I, too, had begun to get the impression

that I was listening to Kyogokudo.

It must run in the family.

My eloquent friend's eloquent sister made a face before concluding, "However, it's pretty clear that this door cannot be locked from the outside. Unless all three are lying, I'd say this clears Kyoko of suspicion. I think I have to agree with Enokizu that Makio *was* in the room."

"That's right," Enokizu said, looking at Ryoko. "Your sister and, erm, that man just now aren't lying, in the main."

"But that means a human being really did vanish. What, did he melt like ice and evaporate?"

Atsuko shot me a worried look. Then she, too, turned to Ryoko. "You mentioned that there is another door inside the room? We can't really say anything until we've looked at that."

"So let's go in and find out," Enokizu said, approaching the door.

"Just a moment," Ryoko said, stopping him. She looked distinctly gaunt.

Atsuko stepped in front of Enokizu. "May we go inside?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Well..."

"What, is there some problem?" Enokizu tried to push past Atsuko.

"As I said before, Kyoko is inside this room."

"She won't allow a visit?"

"No... That is, it has been more than a year since she's been confined to that bed, and lately it's taken a toll on her nerves. She has trouble distinguishing between her delusions and reality. She can get rather excited over the littlest things, and I'm afraid she might do herself harm if she became too distraught."

Hearing Ryoko speak, I felt more afraid for her than for her sister. Her pale face had become even whiter, her features more waxen. Just like the girl I had met that time in the lobby of the hospital.

"You don't mean to tell us we've come all this way and we can't meet your sister?" Enokizu said incredulously.

"No, that is why you've come, and I do wish you to meet Kyoko—but as I have said, she is very frail. She becomes quite frightened when anyone other than myself enters the room. She won't even let the nurses in. Which is why, though I must apologize for the inconvenience, I would like to ask that only one of you join me inside," Ryoko explained.

Atsuko and I exchanged glances, considering our options. We could always send in Enokizu. With his unusual abilities, it was true that he might solve the entire case the moment he walked through that door. Yet if he did not, the chances of him performing the detailed examination of the room needed to solve the mystery were close to nil. If investigation was our goal,

then Atsuko was really the best choice. However, I found myself wanting to see her again—that girl I had met that day—Kyoko Kuonji.

"Very well, I'll go."

Contrary to our expectations, it was Enokizu who stepped up. It was hard to believe this was the same man who, only minutes before, had seemed so unwilling to listen to the rest of the family. I had assumed he'd pass the ball to me—I had rather expected it, to tell the truth; it certainly would have made sense, based on all that had happened. But now I found I was wrong.

"All right, then I'll take a look around outside," Atsuko immediately offered, and without waiting for a response, she turned swiftly as a cat and left the bedroom, leaving me hanging, with nothing to do but stand there, fidgeting and staring into space. I couldn't follow after Atsuko, nor could I barrel past Enokizu into the next room. So I stood, and waited.

Ryoko nodded, saying nothing, and without even knocking, she quietly turned the doorknob. I saw the muscles tense in her slender, white arm. The door did not open easily; it was not that the hinges were rusted, just that the door itself was heavy, and fit so tightly to its frame.

Ryoko's brow furrowed with effort. With a curious sound of creaking wood and rushing air, the sealed room opened.

"Kyoko? It's me," Ryoko said through the crack when the door had opened partway. Then she swung it wide and entered the next chamber. Enokizu followed.

The first thing I heard from inside was an oddly choked gasp. It was Enokizu. The door wasn't yet closed behind him. I hesitated a moment, but before I knew it, I had moved up to where I could see into the archive room.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I whispered to Enokizu's back. He was still standing in the doorway, and he turned, his hand on his mouth. He looked positively ill. "Sekiguchi, look!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

Enokizu never called me by my real name. Fearing that something was truly amiss, I peered over his shoulder into the room beyond.

Ryoko was standing before a bed. There was a mounded-up pile of sheets, and behind it, the horribly haggard face of a woman with eyes like empty holes.

No one said a thing. No one moved. Once again, I found myself an interloper in a tableau of waxen figures. The chamber was dim and remarkably cold. It was larger than I had expected. From where I was standing, it looked like the walls on three sides were completely covered in towering bookshelves, save for a gap on the back wall where the second door stood.

Enokizu abruptly walked out of the room and shut the heavy door behind him.

"What is it, Eno? What's wrong?"

"That's what I want to know, Seki. You saw it too, didn't you? Disgusting!" he muttered, practically cursing under his breath. I panicked, worried that Ryoko might overhear.

"What are you talking about? This is no way to act in front of an ill woman!"

"No way to act? Yes. I see now it's probably best I don't act at all. In fact, I wish I hadn't come. Now I have to leave and get this taste out of my mouth."

"I can't believe you! I don't care what you think you saw. What would they—the two of them inside—think if they heard you?"

"Oh, they can't hear me. We could fire off a cannon and they wouldn't hear us through this door."

"What if they come out?"

What might the two poor sisters in there be thinking? What if Ryoko started wondering what we were doing, and opened the door? How crestfallen would she be if she heard the people who were supposed to be helping her arguing like this?

"I'm telling you Seki, I can't look at that in there."

"You knew about Kyoko's condition long time ago! Why wimp out—"

"I'm not talking about her being pregnant. You saw what I'm talking about! Don't tell me you didn't. I know you did."

"I'm sorry, but I saw nothing. I'm a regular human being, remember? I'm not like you, Eno—I can't see things regular people can't see. I can't!"

"What nonsense are you talking about? You mean you didn't notice? You really didn't see it?"

"See what? What are you going on about? That baby with a frog face again? You're the one who's been spouting nonsense this whole time! Really, I thought you were better than this." My voice ramped higher and higher in my outrage.

"Sekiguchi, are you all right?" my friend asked with a distinctly perplexed expression.

"I'm all right now that I know better than to rely on you, Eno. Look, I'll do this."

"Do this? Do what? There's only one thing left to do, and that's call the police!"

"What's this, now? I thought you hated the police! Why did you accept the case at all if you're so willing to turn the investigation over to them?"

"Investigation? I thought we were here just to ask questions."

"Whatever. You're relieved of duty, Eno. I'll solve this mystery on my own." My voice had gotten steadily louder; maybe I actually *wanted* Ryoko to hear me from the other side of the door.

Enokizu stared at me dumbly for a moment before saying weakly, "Seki-

guchi, are you okay? I don't know what you're on about, but the people in this family—they're flat-out crazy. Every last one of them. Maybe you too! Eh? You crazy?"

—*He's a crazy.*

—*A crazy, escaped from the asylum.*

I felt the back of my neck flush. My vision went white.

"I'm not crazy! You're the one who's crazy!" I shouted. Or at least, that's what I tried to shout, but my tongue kept tripping over my teeth and I wasn't sure Enokizu could even understand me. He looked at me with fear on his face, backing away from my inarticulate outburst.

"In any event—I've done all I can do here," he said. "A word of advice, Sekiguchi: talk to Kiba."

"Look, I don't need your directions, Eno! And I am not crazy. Neither are these people!"

A sad look flickered across Enokizu's face. Then he turned and walked out without saying another word.

I kept muttering to myself, even after he left.

"I'm not crazy. I'm not..."

Something like fear trickled down my spine. I spun around to find that the door was open. A woman's white face was staring at me.

"Is something wrong? Did Mr. Enokizu—I'm afraid I must have said something to offend him."

How long had Ryoko been standing there?

I was at a loss for words. Sweat ran in a waterfall down my brow. My face burned.

"What is it? Mr. Seki—I mean, Mr. Sekiguchi. That is your name, yes?"

At the moment that Ryoko called me by my real name, my tension had reached its peak—but as soon as she had spoken it, my nerves calmed to sudden smoothness.

"As the detective warned us he might do, he has suddenly departed. I hope you won't object if I handle the case from here on out?"

Who was talking? Was that me? I had the peculiar sensation that my conscious self had withdrawn to some corner far, far away, and some other personality was controlling my actions.

"I understand. That won't be a problem at all, Mr. Sekiguchi."

The strong smell of disinfectant assaulted my nose. And there was something else—a medicinal smell, perhaps; or perhaps someone had been burning incense. Whatever it was, it filled the archive chamber with a pungent odor. And something else about the room was strange: even as I stepped to the doorway I could feel that it was very cold in there, chilly, even though it was

almost uncomfortably hot outside. Peering through the dim, blue-tinted light, I could have believed that it was winter.

The volume of books in the archive was staggering. Every inch of wall space was lined with bookshelves piled high, the stacks reaching all the way up to the ceiling. I saw Japanese, Chinese, and Western books all mixed together.

I could picture Kyogokudo drooling at the sight.

No, wait—knowing him, he would probably have been furious at the lack of order—he couldn't stand the sight of unsorted books. Yet it would have taken even him a good two or three days to pore through every volume in the room.

Thoughts that had nothing to do with the case were flitting through my head.

In one corner I saw a stepladder, the sort used in libraries for reaching books on high shelves.

If you stood on that stepladder you might be able to reach the ceiling.

Maybe there was a way out—a loose panel.

I looked up.

In the middle of the room, a large cross-shaped fluorescent light hung down, looking like a lighted ceiling fan. It appeared to be mounted rather flimsily, making me worry that it could suddenly drop down on the bed below. Four pairs of light tubes extended from its center—eight large tubes in all—attached by the thinnest of chords to a fixture in the ceiling.

The ceiling curved slightly upward to its center, forming a shallow dome. I was sure the style had some name, but that was beyond the ken of an architectural ignoramus such as myself. However, I did note that the ceiling seemed strongly built, with a surface of some kind of hardened plaster; there were no holes of any kind, at least none that I could see. Only half of the fluorescent tubes were actually lit, casting the better part of the room in shadow, and I had to squint to make out any detail.

My eyes traveled from the ceiling down to the walls.

The bookshelves did reach to the ceiling's edge, but because of the ceiling's curvature, there was a gap above the uppermost books—nothing large enough for anyone to hide in, however. And I realized that even for someone standing atop the stepladder it would have been difficult to reach that high. It would have been necessary to stretch up on tiptoes just to get to the books on the top shelf, and being a man of short stature, I wondered if I would even be able to do that.

"Mr. Sekiguchi?"

Ryoko's voice called me back to reality. My eyes lowered until I was looking straight at her.

In the middle of the room, beneath the cross-shaped fluorescent light, sat a large bed with a metal frame. Ryoko was standing by the sideboard on the bed's left-hand side, next to an I.V. stand. Sitting up in the bed was Kyoko Kuonji, her arms cradling her swollen belly.

"My sister," I heard Ryoko saying.

I felt my vision suddenly narrow, as if peering down a tunnel. I had to move my head to see Ryoko's sister in her entirety, sitting there in misery.

She was terribly haggard. Her eyes were sunken, her skin dry, her lips without color. Her long hair stuck to her skin as if wet. The similarity in the two sisters' faces only made her lack of vitality more apparent.

Kyoko Kuonji—

I walked toward her, carefully sorting through words before I said a thing. I had no idea what I might ask her. I noticed a large desk sitting off to the side... My thoughts were scattered; I'd be standing right at her bedside in just a moment. But what was that, shining into the corner of my eye? A fruit knife someone dropped on the floor, or maybe—

Without warning, Kyoko reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward her with ferocious strength. "Makio! Makio! Where have you been? You don't have to worry anymore. I—I'm pregnant, look. You have your heir, my child. Look how big it is. I won't do those things anymore, I promise. Please forgive me. I'm so sorry. So sorry."

For a few terrifying moments, I had no idea what was happening. Kyoko gripped my arm like a vise, pleading in a shrill voice, and proceeded to thrust my hand onto her swollen belly, her distended breasts. I could not believe how strong she was. In my shock I did not resist her, until it came home to me what was happening—and at the same time, I realized I had no idea what to do. It was Ryoko who came to my rescue.

"Kyoko! Kyoko! Snap out of it, please! This is Mr. Sekiguchi—he's going to search for Makio for us!" Ryoko grabbed her sister by the shoulder, and shook her.

All at once Kyoko's grip on my arm relaxed, and she blubbered incoherently for a few moments; then her expression suddenly shifted, and she looked at her sister with the frightened eyes of a stray pup. "Ryoko—sister—I'm sorry. I—I'm better now. It won't happen again."

Without a word, Ryoko stepped between us, gently straightening her sister's disheveled night robes. I realized that other than the white cotton cloth around her belly, the ill woman was hardly wearing a thing. Over Ryoko's shoulder I caught a glimpse of blue veins running across a bare, white breast.

I looked away.

"I must apologize for her state. It's all right now. It is all right, isn't it, Kyoko?" Ryoko turned back to her sister, who was staring at her with those same sad puppy eyes.

"I'm...Kyoko Kuonji," Kyoko said, her head rotating almost mechanically to look at me. "I'm sorry...for what happened just now. Please forgive me." When calm, Kyoko's voice was startlingly like her sister's. "I—it shames me that you must see me, bed-ridden like this—and after such a greeting, you must think me quite mad."

It was clearly painful for her merely to talk. The hideous strength she had displayed a moment before was gone, and it took all her effort just to form a few words. But the light of reason had returned to her eyes.

—*Well? Aren't you going to say anything?*

"My name is Sekiguchi. Please, do not worry on my account." I had trouble speaking too. My mouth was dry from the tense silence I had held since entering the room. I cleared my throat, "Have you been in this library—in these archives this entire time? I would think one of the wards in the old building would be more comfortable?"

Kyoko ashamedly lowered her eyes. "Yes, you're probably right—but this is the room where my husband disappeared—and I cannot help but think that, were he to return, he would appear here; so here I stay. It is foolishness, I know. Laugh, if you wish."

I imagined Fujimaki suddenly materializing out of nowhere in an empty room.

Laughter was the furthest thing from my mind.

"This...is quite a collection of books, here. Did these belong to Makio?"

"No. I don't believe any of my husband's books are in here. This collection was passed down through my family for generations—which makes it sound grander than it is, though they have been building up here gradually since Edo times. Some of them belong to our father, I believe."

"The original library was in our living quarters," Ryoko added. "When the fighting became bad in the war, and the mainland was threatened, our father moved all of the books to an air raid shelter. He said they were our family's most valuable possession. It is good that he did so, because it meant that the original library's contents were saved when the library itself burned to the ground. The air shelter was later buried—it was deemed unsafe due to risk of collapse—and by the time that happened there was no room left in our living quarters to put such a large amount of books. So when we renovated this building, we placed the new archive room here." I had wondered at the reasoning behind putting such a large collection in a building meant for a young couple, but this explanation made a great deal of sense.

Yet it was clear that not many changes had been made to the old ward when it was renovated. The family had probably spent more time and money on this room with all its bookshelves than they had on the couple's living quarters—which, now that I thought about it, struck me as very strange.

"Might I ask about your husband? Specifically, about your relationship with your husband—with Makio?"

"To be honest, we were not the closest of couples."

"Meaning...?"

"He rarely talked to me—not much, anyhow—and we never talked as a husband and wife ought to do—which is not to say I really know what sorts of discussions other newlyweds might or might not have."

As she spoke, Kyoko gazed at the door through which we had just entered.

Like Fujimaki was standing there.

"I apologize if this is difficult to speak about, but I understand there were fights—several fights between the two of you?"

"Yes—though they were always one-sided. I would vent my frustrations, and that would be that. You must understand that he never said a harsh word, let alone raised a hand. He was like a saint in that regard. He—"

"What was the cause of these fights?"

"I...I don't know. I can't remember one clear cause of it. It was just a series of misunderstandings, really, words and emotions passing by in opposite directions. Perhaps there wasn't one single cause, but just an accumulation of little missteps piling one atop another. When I think about it now it raises my bile at my own stupidity. What a terrible thing—and because of me!"

As she spoke, large tears coursed down Kyoko's cheeks, and when she was finished, she lowered her eyes.

"So, you believe that the reason for your husband's vanishing lies in your actions?"

I was through playing the detective now. My questions had taken on the patina of a bedside psychiatric caseworker—a role that suited me far better than the ill-fitting mantle of the detective's assistant.

"He never fought back. Never resisted. I now think that I was spoiled—yes, quite spoiled. No matter how harsh my words, he held his words back, clenched them between his teeth, swallowed them—and listened to my every request. At the time I thought him weak, but now I realize what a terrible wife I was. I cursed him, and kicked at him. And then, I did something terrible..."

"Something terrible?"

Kyoko looked up suddenly, as if surprised. She stole a glance at her sister.

"It's all right, Kyoko. You can tell Mr. Sekiguchi. Don't hold anything back," Ryoko said, like a mother counseling her child.

"Yes, of course." Kyoko's face looked even more haggard than before, and her eyes dropped to the bedspread once again. When she spoke, the words came slowly and heavily from her lips. "I did something...which cannot be forgiven. Of course, you need to know more than that, don't you? ... There was a time when I—when I suspected there might be something between my

husband and my sister."

Kyoko turned fearful eyes toward her sibling, but Ryoko was silent.

"O-Of course, it was all in my head," Kyoko added hastily. "I knew that best myself. My husband was never angry with me, and I only wanted to say something that would make him so. Neither my sister nor my husband would—would do such a thing, not if all heaven and earth were turned on its head. But I, I—"

Once again she began to cry.

"It's all right," I told her. "I understand there are things you cannot say to others, and I don't need to hear the details. What I would like to know is how you think your husband responded to all this—how did he take it?"

"I can't say for sure. It must have been difficult for him, though. I'm sure he hated me for it. But he was never angry—not even at the end."

"The end?"

"When he walked through that door into this room, yes."

"Why did he come into this room, anyway?"

Kyoko was lost in thought for nearly half a minute before she responded. "That day, the New Year's holidays were still going on, and I remember it as being quite cold. My husband never took a vacation—he was always in his lab, from the time that he finished dinner till he went to bed—and that evening was no different. It must've been about midnight when he returned to our room."

"Was there anything different about his behavior? Did he seem concerned about anything?"

"No, in fact he was in a rare good mood. I, of course, was angry. I had wanted him to stop work for New Year's at least."

"Do you have any idea why he might've been in such a pleasant mood?"

"Well, he did say something about his research being complete—though I confess I have no idea what he was researching in the first place."

"Complete? Did he use that word?"

"Yes, I think so."

Did that mean he had made the homunculus? Had he truly committed that act which the gods despised—the creation of artificial human life? Every hair on my body rose on end.

"And what happened next?"

"I'm afraid I have no memory of anything that happened after he came in—not until after the fight began."

"You have no memory? You mean you've forgotten?"

"People who drink speak of losing their memory of a particular space and time. Perhaps it is like that. There's a period from that evening for which my memory is gone, vanished. I recall nothing."

I despaired. It seemed that what might have been the most important part

of their exchange was lost in the mists of time, with no way to retrieve it. Of course, I had no way of telling whether the woman had truly lost her memory or was merely keeping quiet about something she wanted to hide. Regardless, lacking special talents such as Enokizu's strange vision, I was now without any means of determining what had happened the night of Fujimaki's disappearance.

"My memory returns with my husband, looking frightened, retreating into this room, and hastily closing the door behind him. Things were scattered all about—I can only assume that I threw them—but no matter how much I shouted, or beat upon the door, it wouldn't open. I believe I went mad that night, and stayed so until I went to speak to my father and Naito in the morning."

"Did your husband close the door himself?"

I've heard that question before—

"Yes. He closed it. He was saying 'Why? Why?'"

"'Why,' you said? What did that mean?"

"I do not know."

"'Why'..." It struck me as somewhat odd for a person to close a door on himself while asking a question. "There were traces of blood on the floor—in your bedroom. Did you know about this? The floor was stained beneath the carpet under the bed."

"I have no idea. Perhaps my husband or I was injured. I noticed after I calmed down that my body was covered with bruises—and when I finally tidied up the room, I remember wiping up something that might have been blood—I don't recall it clearly."

"When did you clean the room?"

"The next day—in the morning. When my husband did not come out, I became very worried—I believe I started to clean up to distract myself. Perhaps I thought that if I cleaned the room and waited he would come out."

I stood in amazement, feeling that even more evidence was slipping through my fingers. It seemed clear from her story that Kyoko had not been in her right mind at the time of the disappearance. Even worse, before she regained her sanity she had apparently disposed of any physical evidence that might have aided her memory.

Everything Kyoko said after that agreed with Naito's testimony. When she had pushed past Naito into the archive after he broke down the door, only to find the chamber empty, it was all she had been able to do to stand and stare.

I couldn't bring myself to ask whether there had been any conjugal relations between her and her husband. It was not because I was embarrassed. It was because of the way Ryoko was looking at me. Kyoko's shoulders heaved in

time with her breathing; telling the story had taken a lot out of her.

I had run out of questions, and had made no progress whatsoever.

—*The only one who thinks we've made any progress at all is you, Seki.*

—*So let's go in and find out.*

Find out what? The door had been opened, and still I had gotten nowhere.

What had Enokizu seen? Had he found something out, as he had thought he would?

Another question occurred to me.

No, I can't ask that.

But I had to.

But—

"Kyoko, might I ask one final question? Do you remember—this would be more than ten years ago now—do you remember receiving a love letter?"

Kyoko's bloodshot eyes went wide. "A love letter! Why do you ask me about that? Why do you ask the *same thing he did!*"

It was as if the light of reason I had seen come into her eyes had suddenly switched off again.

She glared at me, sockets hollow like a corpse's. I trembled.

"What do you know?! Why do you ask me the same thing he asked me—the thing only he knows! I never received anything of the sort! I don't remember any love letter! I never saw one! Why must you press me so? What is it about this love letter?!"

Her face was like a demon's. I stepped back, flustered.

—*It must've been quite a frightening experience for you.*

—*I mean—Kyoko looked quite terrible. And then there was—*

"Y-You must have received the letter. I know. Because the student who handed it to you—"

Mm hm hm.

"—was me."

"Mr. Sekiguchi! You—"

It was Ryoko, not her sister who shouted in surprise.

I staggered backward, barely in control of my actions. The room was too big; I could walk back forever and never hit a wall. I kept going, stepping back into the darkness.

The room flickered like an old 8mm reel. Ryoko grabbed onto her sister's heaving shoulders, and held her for a moment; then she removed a syringe from a metal case on the sideboard. Deftly, she inserted the needle into her sister's arm. The scene stuttered. I was losing frames. Everything progressed in slow motion. Madness slowly released its grip on Kyoko, and she sobbed like a baby, gradually quieting at about the same time that I clawed my way

back to reality.

"I've given her a sedative. She will be asleep before long. I'm afraid the questions are over for now."

I could not respond. I felt the onset of aphasia. Ryoko returned the syringe to its container and stepped toward me. "I believe my sister truly does not know about this love letter. But how..." She came close to me, looking at me with gentle, sad eyes. "You are a mysterious man, Mr. Sekiguchi," she said quietly. "Your name was not your only secret."

"I-I'm sorry," I stuttered. "I did not mean to hide anything from you. Makio—Makio Fujino was in the class above me in high school. It was too much of a coincidence, my connection to his past. I did not know how to bring it up. I must apologize."

Ryoko was silent.

"And I didn't remember that love letter myself until I came here today."

What was I making excuses for? And who was this talking, anyway? Once the aphasia set in, I typically went a half-day or more before uttering another word.

Ryoko stepped away.

Wait—

I wanted to call out to her, to stop her, but I couldn't remember how.

—*I don't want to be alone.*

"A..." I made a noise that was not a word.

"This is the second door."

Ryoko was standing in front of the door on the other side of the room. She turned soundlessly.

What had happened just now? A feeling had risen inside me, then disappeared so swiftly I couldn't quite place it. It wasn't loneliness or desolateness, but something sweet, familiar...

I tried to put it out of my mind as I walked across the room.

The second door was made of the same material as the first, with the same attention to detail that left not a single gap at any edge. However, it was much smaller, only two-thirds the size.

"The closure on this door is the same, a drawbar that can only be opened from within the room on the other side," Ryoko explained, never looking in my direction. I took hold of the doorknob and tried to open the door, but it might as well have been a wall. It didn't budge.

"But if this door is locked, then does that mean someone's in the room on the other side now?"

"No. There is a door leading from the other room to the outside. No one is in there now."

But that would mean—

This room wasn't sealed at all!

"But then... As long as this door wasn't locked when he came in, Makio could've gone outside."

"Actually, he could not." Ryoko spoke slowly, her expression never changing. "The room on the other side of this door is quite small—it was only a storage area, used for medicine and supplies. This pediatrics building was built just after the turn of the century, I believe; and perhaps the architect was unconventional, or following some design with which I am unfamiliar, but in any case all the interior doors were constructed so that they could be locked only from inside the rooms they led to. This caused some safety issues, obviously, so we removed the locks from all of the hospital rooms, but these storage areas remained as they were. So this room and the storage room next door can only be locked by someone on the inside. However, since medical supplies were kept in there, we didn't want just anyone walking in off the street, so once the day's procedures were done, the doctor in charge would lock this door from within the room, then proceed outside and lock the exterior door behind him."

Ryoko put her hand on the storage room door. She looked almost wistful. "The pediatrician in charge of this room—I believe his name was Sugano—died in the air raids, and ever since then the storage area has remained closed."

"So this Mr. Sugano locked this door from the other side as usual, then locked the door going outside as well—and then left?"

"Yes. He disappeared during the war, along with the only key to the outside door."

"What is the exterior lock like?"

"It's a large padlock. There was no extra key. The door is very sturdy, too, and to my amateur eye, there was no sign anyone had tried to get it open."

"So, if by some chance the door here had been left unlocked, Makio could have gone into the storage room. But then he wouldn't have been able to get out, unless he came back through this door again."

"Yes; but if that were the case, then the door would be unlocked now. Since it isn't, if Makio somehow had gotten inside the small room he must still be in there."

The thought sent chills down my spine. He could be dead in there—it certainly was a possibility. Still, if that were the case, it would leave the question of how he had been able to open the small door in the first place.

"I remember hearing that the door to the storage room was quite firmly shut when the bookshelves were moved in here, so I can't see how it could have gotten opened since then."

"That makes the storage room next door a real sealed room."

"It does. As far as we know, no one has been in there for seven years."

My feeling now wasn't a mystery to me at all.

It was despair.

The mysterious sealed room was sealed by another sealed room.

I bowed slightly to the sleeping Kyoko and left the archive room with the complex taste of defeat in my mouth. On my way out, I checked the drawbar lock, ascertaining beyond a doubt that it could not be operated from the other side of the door by means of either strings or magnets. It was the only thing I'd learned all day of which I was truly certain.

I left the bedroom and went into the waiting room to find Atsuko slouched on a worn sofa. I cannot express the relief I felt at seeing her boyish face again.

"I will call a car," Ryoko said as calmly as ever from beside me. "Could you wait in the lobby of the old building?" Then, just as she had at Enokizu's office, she departed, leaving an air of loneliness in her wake.

We—no, I—had come to give her hope, and had brought only despair. Thinking that, my heart ached.

"Sensei," Atsuko said quietly, once Ryoko was completely out of sight. "What happened with Enokizu?"

"Him? Oh, he's useless. I don't plan on speaking to the man ever again," I said uncaringly. But inside, I was growing increasingly uneasy. The fact was that the only clues we had to go on now were Enokizu's visions. Could I really hope to solve this case without involving him in some way? "Did he say anything to you?" I asked Atsuko.

"Well..." She frowned, furrowing her brow just as her brother did. "It was strange. I was examining the exterior of the building, and Enokizu came walking out, almost in a daze. Oh my, I thought, something's gone wrong; and I called out to him. He didn't respond, so I called a second time, and a third, and on the fourth time he finally turned and said, 'Oh, hello there, Atsu. How many times did you just call me?'"

"What did you say?"

"I told him I had called him four times, and he nodded as if that made some kind of sense."

"Bizarre."

"Then he said, 'You'd think I'd have heard you—it's not like I can close my ears, you know'—something like that. Then he told me that I mustn't go into that room, and that I should call the police at once."

"What, you called the cops?"

"Of course not. I don't even know where the phone is in this place."

Enokizu's behavior was becoming more and more confusing to me—and what good were his visions going to do us if I couldn't understand them? Now

that I thought about it, the whole idea that he was able to see other people's memories was Kyogokudo's suggestion, and I had just swallowed it, unquestioning. It was perfectly possible that, in fact, Enokizu was nothing more than a maladjusted freewheeler not fit for civilized society who had made a few good guesses.

I briefly explained what I had seen inside, including Kyoko's condition, to Atsuko, skipping over my own flustered behavior as I told the story.

"Okay, so the door I saw just now was the outside door to the second sealed room," Atsuko said, nodding to herself. She had come across the exit to the storage room, and as far as she could tell, the door was locked tight.

I decided to go see for myself.

Along the way, I kept an eye out for openings in the roof or walls, but there was nothing suspicious in the least. Atsuko had apparently scoured the place, from the base of the wall up to the eaves. She had even found a ladder and climbed up onto the roof. I'm sure her brother wouldn't have liked to hear about that, but I had to commend her for her thoroughness. The only things she had found, however, were three small ducts for ventilation near the top of the wall. They had been hidden by the bookshelves on the inside. However, they were so small a kitten could barely have gotten through them, let alone a grown man.

The grass grew thickly around the back of the building—few people had passed that way recently. The storage room's exterior door was built just the same as the two old doors on the inside, and had been fastened with an enormous padlock that looked like something from the previous century. I gave the door handle a tug. It didn't budge.

"Well," I said to Atsuko, "it looks like all of the possibilities you outlined are washed up now, except for the one where everyone is lying."

"Actually, the discovery of this door has opened a new possibility," she replied, her voice firm in contrast to my weak delivery. "One of the three people outside may have had the key to this lock—or perhaps there was another person in league with Makio, a conspirator who opened the door for him."

Atsuko and I went back the way we had come, taking the path that led towards the old building. When we reached the new building we turned and went in, stopping by the laboratory to pick up the journals and research notes we had bundled and left there. Atsuko grabbed the stack of notebooks by the string, but as she lifted it up, the stack wobbled and the notebooks slid out onto the floor.

"That's odd. I thought I tied it up real tight." Kneeling to retie the bundle, she told me to go on ahead.

I did as I was told, passing through the destroyed section of the building, making for the main corridor.

"Mr. Sekiguchi?"

Huh?

At first, I thought I was hearing things. Someone was calling my name, but the direction of the voice was hard to pinpoint.

"Mr. Sekiguchi?"

It was Ryoko. She was standing in the courtyard, in front of the planter with the white flowers. I hurried out of the hallway into the courtyard, drawn toward her as if pulled by some unseen force. She was surrounded by a halo of white—an image of brightness pure of all color. Like a monochrome photograph. And the white flowers, like wide-rimmed trumpets—

"Those are *daturas*," I said suddenly.

"Oh? I never knew the name. I always thought they were morning glories." Ryoko took hold of the stem of one of the larger flutes and brought it close to her face. Her face was as white as the flower.

"Not so close. Those are poisonous." I grabbed her wrist, stopping the movement of her hand.

My fingers wrapped around Ryoko's delicate arm.

Datura, sometimes called "Korean morning glory," is a member of the deadly nightshade family. The plant contains three psychotropic alkaloids, giving it the nickname of "crazy weed." The alkaloids are found in the highest concentration in the flower, leaves, and seeds of the plant, and intake can cause delirium and hallucinations.

That is how I explained the white flowers to Ryoko, but even as I was talking, I could not hear my own voice.

The palm of my hand was touching Ryoko's skin.

She said something about it being a most frightening flower indeed.

My lips moved of their own accord, telling her, *Yes, the flower is poisonous. Yes, she should not touch it.*

"...but if it's such a dangerous flower, why grow it here?"

My fingers loosened somewhat. "*Daturas* have medicinal qualities, too. They used to be used for making sleeping draughts, anesthetics, and sedatives. If this hospital has been around as long as you say it has, it would make sense that the plant was cultivated here. I think most of the active ingredients for Dr. Seishu Hanaoka's anesthetic—the first made in Japan—came from these flowers."

Ryoko nodded and remarked that that was fascinating. Then she turned toward me, so that we faced each other. My hand was still on her wrist.

"Before the new building and the annex were built, all this was a large garden—I believe much of it was used to grow medicinal herbs. When the law was changed so that you needed a license to make medicine, they stopped growing them here. This courtyard is a remnant from those older days. It was originally filled with all sorts of strange and not-at-all-pretty bushes and weeds. These flowers were the only nice ones, and I've loved them ever since I

was a child. That's why, even after the war, I tended this planter and watered them. I never knew they were medicinal."

Ryoko took a step closer to me. She did not try to release my grip. Her white face was only inches from mine. "You are very knowledgeable about medicine, Mr. Sekiguchi."

Her gaze captured mine. Like a frog, frozen to the spot, charmed by a snake, I was unable to look anywhere but into those eyes.

I shouldn't look.

I knew I shouldn't look, but I was unable even to blink.

I was—

"I was pre-med in school—I wanted to be a neurologist, actually. So, in my own limited way, I have a basic understanding of medicine. I'm no expert, mind you."

Halfway through my vaguely boasting, vaguely explanatory revelation, Ryoko swooned. I reached out and put my arm around her waist.

"Mister...Sekiguchi."

I could not look at her face. It was too close. I turned my head, and found myself looking straight at the giant, white *datura*.

My heart throbbed in my throat.

Everything went white before my eyes.

The back of my neck was on fire.

I could feel Ryoko's soft breathing in my ear, her voice so quiet I could barely hear it.

"Save me."

Dizziness overcame me and I could not reply.

4

The 5th of June, 1950 (Mon.) Clear, then cloudy.

The marriage papers have been submitted. Today I discard the name of Fujino, mine since childhood, and take on the name Kuonji. As for that which has been troubling me—I have been unable to find out anything. Or rather, I have not even had the opportunity to make an inquiry. It worries me. Furthermore, though I know it to be a trifling matter, the fact that I was ignorant for such a long time of my own gross error is shameful and causes me much anguish.

The 2nd of July, 1950 (Sun.) Cloudy with patches of sunshine.

I have finally broached the topic with my wife, yet she claims to remember nothing of it. Either she suffers from some lapse of memory, or she is hiding something—I have no way of knowing. Regardless, I must find out what has become of the child. The Kinkakurokuon-ji Temple burned to the ground today. Arson.

The 3rd of August, 1950 (Thu.) Cloudy, then clear.

I have no one to blame but myself for my wife's madness. I am frustrated at my own powerlessness to do anything but sit and endure. I must uncover the truth of what happened as soon as I can, that I might repent for my original sin, and find some way to take responsibility.

Rice rations from the city began today.

The 23rd of August, 1950 (Wed.) Beautiful skies.

Finally, I met with Dr. K of the Keio University Medical Department's Obstetrics Division. When I told him I was, at long last, seeing results from my research, but that I expected more difficulties ahead, he granted me access to records of his successes from the year before and the procedures he used—very valuable information. I was moved by both his deep interest in my work, and his willingness to offer advice. However, his methods are unlikely to aid my own personal quest, given the insufficient sperm count. It is clear that more research is required before real progress can be made.

"Hrm. He's very precise about the weather. Can't say much about the writing, though. He chooses good words, but he sure doesn't know how to use them, eh?" Kyogokudo muttered. "The presentation is simple—if a little syrupy at times." He puffed at the cloud of smoke (his own) around his head as he casually critiqued our friend's journals.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Sekiguchi, please. I've been doing nothing but listen to you talk from the moment your eyes opened, and it hasn't been more than a minute since you finally deigned to share these with me. And I just grabbed the one on top and skimmed through the first twenty-three days. How am I supposed to have figured anything out from that? Besides which, I actually just told you what I think about them."

"Well, what do you think about everything—about what I told you last night?"

I hadn't gone home on the previous evening. I'd been tired, but elated and not at all in the mood to go home and sleep. So, after saying my farewells to Atsuko in Shinjuku, I had dropped in on Kyogokudo. Fortunately, his wife had yet to return from Kyoto, so I'd stayed over. I had only called my wife to tell her where I was.

"You've been talking since you got here last night, and I'm still not sure I see your point. Of course, now that I've heard the story so many times, I am starting to come to one or two of my own conclusions. Yes, let's see..."

Kyogokudo busily flipped through the pages of the journal he held in his hand, then swatted it back onto the pile and picked up another. He carefully checked the front and back before opening it.

The 8th of January, 1951 (Mon.) Clear, slightly misty in the afternoon.

My research is almost complete. Though I can hardly hope to make amends to the child, who is surely dead by now, perhaps this will serve as some small reparation to my wife and the Kuonji household. Though a few might object to what they see as an offense to the natural laws, for any soldier wounded in battle such as myself, my findings will surely be the best sort of news. Above all else, I am happy that my wife can be helped without being subjected to such humiliation. I can only hope that her madness, too, will be cured by the successful conclusion of my efforts. I am going to divulge the good news to her now. I wonder what her reaction will be.

"That's the last entry."

"Yeah," I said. "One thing I've figured out—it seems like his research into an 'offense to the natural laws' was about a homunculus, like Naito said. I'm not sure why that would be good news to wounded soldiers, though."

"Never mind that. What interests me is the boldfaced lie these journal entries reveal." Kyogokudo favored me with a look that suggested I was an idiot for not noticing it myself.

"What's that? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Take a close look here, Sekiguchi. See how he says it was misty in the afternoon? If my memory serves me, the mist that day lasted until well into the next morning."

"So it was misty—so what?"

"You said that the rooms in that pediatrics building were tightly sealed, yes? I assume the bedroom was similarly constructed?"

The windowless storeroom had indeed been sealed tight, almost suffocatingly so. Though the windows in the bedroom had made it feel more open by comparison, the airtight construction was more or less the same. I nodded.

"So, if the windows were closed, there wouldn't be much sound getting in or out?"

"That's true, actually. I remember the cicadas being almost totally muted inside. Outside, they were so noisy you could hardly hear yourself think."

"So, pretty much sound-proof. And what did Naito say? Something about being able to hear whatever was said down there when the windows were open, right? I'm sure that's true enough; but tell me, who would leave the windows open in January, the coldest time of the year, in the middle of the night, with a thick mist in the air? And yet Mr. Naito knew exactly what the couple had been fighting about. Even if we assume that he'd opened his own window to eavesdrop on them, Kyoko and her hubby would have had to open *their* windows while having their argument in order for him to listen in. Not to mention that this fight is the one thing our beleaguered Miss Kyoko does not remember. But Naito does—Naito, who was in another building, unable to hear them."

"Hey, you're right," I said, feeling a flush of excitement. Something had bothered me about Naito's testimony, but I hadn't been able to put my finger on it. Perhaps this was what had been tugging at my subconscious. "So Naito was lying about what they said? That business about an heir?"

"I think you're wrong there, *sensei*," Kyogokudo put his fingers on his temples. "Why would he make up an argument he hadn't heard? Just as Enokizu said, Naito must've been *in the bedroom* with Kyoko the night of the incident."

"But that means that Naito and Kyoko were—"

"—deeply involved in some way, I'm sure. Yes, they must have been very familiar indeed. After all, according to Enokizu, they were in bed together

after midnight. And here comes our grinning, happy husband through the door—but something doesn't fit." Kyogokudo looked down, and pondered for a moment. "It's this journal. It doesn't sound like he's cursing the Kuonjis, or mad at them at all—rather he seems to be trying to make amends for something. It's evident that *something* happened in the past that he's not making clear. Just what is a 'trifling gross error,' anyway? And who is this child he thinks is dead?"

Kyogokudo fell silent again, but after a short time, he caught my eye once more. "Incidentally, Sekiguchi, what do you make of Miss Kyoko's lapses in memory? This journal seems to indicate that she had the problem before. Perhaps it's some kind of disease?"

It just so happened I had an opinion on the matter. "As I see it—and this is just a theory, mind you—she may have estranged identity syndrome: that is, multiple personalities. When her personality switches, she forgets what she did in her previous persona. I just can't picture the rational Kyoko I saw briefly in that room as being the same young girl I gave that love letter to. The hysterical woman throwing things at her husband would be yet another personality—and when she's calm she doesn't seem to remember either of her other selves."

Kyogokudo gave a thoughtful grunt. "So you don't think she has some sort of temporary mental separation, or psychogenic amnesia, but chronic multiple personalities—something she's had since a young age?"

"You have a different opinion?" I asked him, taking a sip of his trademark flavorless tea.

"Yes. I think it was a temporary shutting away of memories, perhaps aggravated by her guilty conscience—something triggered by a subconscious desire to avoid unpleasant emotions too powerful to bear. Psychogenic amnesia, in other words."

"But in the short time that we were talking, she acted strangely twice. If her sister hadn't been by her side, I wonder if she mightn't have completely switched personalities right there on the spot."

"That's the thing—you said that there were *daturas* growing in the garden? You know about the psychotropic alkaloids those flowers contain?"

"Hyoscine, hyoscyamine, and atropine, I believe." Remembering the white blossoms summoned within me once again the sensation of catching Ryoko around the waist, and I felt my tongue work itself into a knot.

"Then you know about the effects those alkaloids can have on the conscious mind. All reactions to outside stimuli cease, internal delusions and hallucinations balloon, and the victim becomes agitated, or speaks in words unintelligible to anyone else. A kind of delirium."

"Wait, Kyogokudo—so you're saying that Kyoko is, right now, subject to the effects of *datura* alkaloids? Someone's drugging her? Why?"

"As an anesthetic, of course."

"Wait a second. She's been refusing all medical treatment, even from her father. Just who do you think is administering this anesthetic?"

Ryoko's face rose in my mind; I saw again the practiced ease with which she had given that shot to her sister.

"Ryoko had been taking care of those flowers, had she not?" Kyogokudo said before falling silent for a third time.

"Say, Kyogokudo..." I made a conscious effort to change the topic of conversation. "You think Fujimaki was really trying to make a homunculus?"

Kyogokudo rolled his eyes as if beseeching me to stop saying such preposterous things.

"What's so ridiculous about it?"

"It's stupid, that's all. Believe me, I'll take a closer look at those research notes. I don't know how many months that dimwitted doctor spent going over them, but I should be able to make it through the whole stack in a day or two. I'm rather excited about the prospect, actually. Things have been boring around the shop lately."

I had no doubt that my friend was capable of reading the journals in their entirety by the next morning if he so desired.

"Remember, Sekiguchi, that the time when the creation of artificial human life was taken quite seriously was not so very long ago. Nor was that thinking as unscientific as you might assume. Why, even Paracelsus, the father of clinical medicine, tried his hand at the art. Of course, he was half an alchemist, though we mustn't forget alchemy's sizable contribution to modern science—the two are inseparable halves of a single whole, really."

"I'm vaguely aware of what you're talking about. Weren't alchemists using semen to make their artificial life?"

"Correct. They'd fill an airtight glass bottle to the brim with semen, and then leave it to sit at 40°C—the body temperature of a horse. Gradually, a translucent human shape would appear in the bottle. They could then grow this creature, feeding it fresh blood, to create something resembling a small-sized human. That was the homunculus—a pack of lies, of course. You can't make a living being like that. But nowadays, we've a much better understanding of how conception actually works. I believe it was the year before last that they actually achieved artificial insemination over at Keio University. Of course, all that amounts to is artificially sending the semen up to do its usual business. Conception itself is still quite natural in that case; you're just providing an alternative means to intercourse. Wait—didn't Fujimaki say something about the head of the obstetrics department at Keio in here?" Kyogokudo rapidly flipped through the pages. "He did! He must have gone to hear what the doctor had to say about artificial insemination."

"So he *was* trying to make a homunculus."

"Whoa, whoa. Your reasoning's got a short circuit there. Slow down a bit. We have the results of his research in these journals here, and like I said, I'll read through them."

Kyogokudo tapped the sheaf. Then, after running his finger down the spines of the stacked journals, he looked up at me. "Here's a question for you, though. Why is this stack of journals missing the first half of 1941—the time I most wanted to read about? It's odd. His time in Germany and in the war are all represented here. Only that part is absent."

"But that doesn't make any sense—I mean, I didn't check all that closely, but why would a section be gone out of the middle like that?"

"I don't know, yet it is."

I scanned carefully down the labels on the spines and found that there was, indeed, one volume missing.

"I hardly think this is the doing of our fastidious friend Fujimaki, which means that someone else removed the notebook. Didn't you say that when you returned to the laboratory you noticed that the strings on the bundle had been loosened?"

I had seen Atsuko tie the journals up tightly myself. Why hadn't I suspected something when they slipped loose later on?

"So you think that while we were in the pediatrics ward, someone came and removed one of these journals? Which would mean that someone at the hospital didn't want us seeing it?"

"Not necessarily. The laboratory wasn't exactly hidden, and the building is easy to get into—the place has got a gaping hole in the roof, after all. If some outsider wanted to steal it, they certainly could. We can't say for sure it was an insider. But I'm guessing the list of people who wouldn't want us to see a private journal ten years old is rather short."

The only person currently part of the hospital who'd had a connection to Fujimaki back when that volume was written was Kyoko. No, the director had also met with him. Had something happened then that one of them didn't want getting out?

"Incidentally, Kyogokudo, why are you so interested in a journal from 1941?"

"Because that's the time when Fujimaki first came into contact with the Kuonjis. The day you delivered his love letter was the 16th of September, 1940. He went to Germany the following year, in April of 1941. I want to know what happened between those two events."

"How do you remember all those dates like that? I was the one who delivered the letter and I'd forgotten about the whole thing!"

"A classic case of psychogenic amnesia. You said yourself last night that people cover up old memories to protect themselves from traumas they've experienced. Do you have any recollection whatsoever of the trouble we went

through on your account?"

I didn't know what he was talking about. While the episode with Kyoko was vivid in my mind, everything after that was lost in a fog.

"You came back to the dorm that night close to eleven o'clock, looking like a man possessed, and for the next two weeks you stayed locked in your room, not talking to anyone. You wouldn't even go to meals, so Enokizu and I came to your room every day and forced you to eat something. I even answered the roll call for you at school. Don't tell me you've forgotten all that?"

"I...I guess I had."

I really didn't remember a thing. It sounded right, and when he mentioned it, I could imagine what he described happening, but it didn't feel at all like something that had actually happened to me.

"That's gratitude for you. If it hadn't been for us, you might not be around at all now, you know that? You were on the verge of collapse, and since you wouldn't tell us a thing, there was nothing we could do. That's when Fujimaki came by, saying he had to see you for some reason. You wouldn't meet with him, so he left a message."

"What'd he say?"

"I already told you," Kyogokudo grumbled, narrowing his eyes at me.

"You know I don't remember it. What did he say?"

"Thanks to you, my dreams will soon be realized"—that was his message."

So he *had* gotten a response from Kyoko Kuonji. A favorable response, from the sound of it. And then Fujimaki had kept his promise to me and gone to ask for her hand.

"I asked him what that was supposed to mean, but all he'd say was that you'd understand if I told you it was about the letter. I figured out that said letter was probably a love letter; but when I asked you about it, you just moaned, and I eventually gave up on the whole thing."

"So how did you put that together with what's happening now?"

"Oh, he had told me how crazy he was for the Kuonji girl. I was the one who told him to write a letter to her in the first place."

That's right, Fujimaki had said the same thing—

Kyogokudo began to flip through the remaining journals, reading a page here and there, and grumbling in between about how it had taken a whole year to get me out of my funk.

"Look, here's something," he said at last.

The 17th of September, 1940 (Tue.) Raining.

Tatsumi Sekiguchi returned to the dormitory last night. I went over to see him three times but was turned away. Chuzenji tells me he's not well. Perhaps

he has fallen suddenly ill? Perhaps something happened.

The 18th of September, 1940 (Wed.) Rain, then cloudy.

An elderly man claiming to be a servant of some sort brought me a letter. I felt like my heart would burst when I opened it. The contents were beyond my wildest expectations. Though I have lived not two decades, I have to say that today is, to date, the happiest day of my life. After writing this, I go to the *kosazuke** ginkgo tree at the temple indicated. It bothers me that I have not yet been able to talk to Sekiguchi and thank him.

"I'm not sure I like prying into his affairs like this—but it looks like he received a response, and went off to some clandestine meeting. Isn't that *kosazuke* ginkgo at Kishimojin? That pretty much proves the letter came from a Kuonji. Well, well... How does it feel, being Cupid?" Kyogokudo asked with a snort. He flipped through the remaining pages of the journal, then looked up at me with a curious expression on his face.

"After that date on September 18th, he meets with her three times later that month, then five times in October, eight times in November, and four times in December. Sounds like he was serious. Not to mention that it's all he talks about in this part of the journal, other than the weather and what he ate. He must not have felt like writing much. But he does mention a few times regretting he couldn't meet with you."

That's right. I remembered—

I had stubbornly refused to see him. No, I hadn't been stubborn; I'd been terrified. Ultimately, I never did meet with him. And then I heard that he had gone to Germany.

For the longest time afterward, the very name *Makio Fujino* had been taboo to me. It linked me to experiences I could not bear to face. To cope, I had erased all memory of him and Kyoko Kuonji from my mind. I might never have remembered that the man existed at all had circumstances not forced me to acknowledge it—circumstances created by the friend who sat before me now, as well as my wife, and Enokizu, and all the others who had tried to connect with me, to restart my stopped time, to pull me from the far shore to the near.

"You're looking pale," Kyogokudo noted, his voice even. "Do you remember something? The endless, viscous dreariness of those days of our youth, perhaps?"

He was always like that, always coming across as if he knew everything,

*Lit. "child-giving," a tree that couples visit to pray for children.

even as he pried his fingers into my guts. The truth of the matter was, I had no idea what this man knew about me. It was perfectly likely he knew nothing at all. Yet his omniscient bearing alone was enough to enthrall me, cast adrift as I was on a bottomless sea, riding the waves, clinging to the splinters of a broken ship. I realized that, at some point in my past, I had surrendered a part of myself to his caretaking. It was as if he gave clarity to my vaguely defined boundaries, my sense of self. For me, an awkward, clumsy youth with only rudimentary communication skills, this surrender had been the easiest choice to make. And he, my unsociable, argumentative friend, had taken—still took—a kind of perverse responsibility for dragging me, kicking and screaming at times, back into the world.

"You know, sometimes you are so out of it, it's hard even to hold a conversation with you."

So saying, Kyogokudo turned to the last few pages of the journal in his hand and began to read:

The 31st of December, 1940 (Tue.) Clear skies.

Having no place to go home to, I will welcome the new year here, in my dormitory. A letter arrived this afternoon. What had been only a vague fear has now been realized. I'm not sure how I can even begin to resolve this situation. An indescribable anxiety wracks me, and I feel faint & detached. Ah, how I wish I could just disappear.

"What is it with this journal? Why is he so damnably vague? I don't see the point of even writing the thing if he's not going to tell us what this 'vague fear' of his is all about," Kyogokudo growled. He tossed the journal across the table.

"These aren't the minutes of a company meeting, or some sort of research notes. He wasn't writing this journal for anybody to read, you know."

"Why write it at all then?" Kyogokudo wanted to know. "Even if the intended audience is yourself alone, nothing is ever written without the intention that it some day be read. But the only thing that's clear in here is the weather! If he can recall past events just by looking at this, I propose that he didn't need to write a journal at all. It's like a long string of words adding up to nothing. Nothing!"

"No sense losing your temper about it. That's how journals are. Maybe someone of your temperament wouldn't appreciate this, but Fujimaki's journal is actually on the good side. I mean, I've written journals myself, but I

never manage to keep going for more than a month. The kind of willpower to keep writing for twenty years without pause should be praised, not derided, if you ask me."

"Well, you certainly seem happy with it, but let me remind you, this is the only clue we have. And where are you getting this 'twenty years' business from? Fujimaki was only four or five years old in 1925. You can't write a journal at that age. It makes no sense. No sense at all..."

Kyogokudo scratched his head furiously, then yanked the earliest dated journal from the midst of the stack. The force of his action knocked the whole pile off balance, and it collapsed, creating a small mountain of notebooks on the tabletop. Uncaring, the bookseller opened the journal he'd grabbed and spread it out atop the pile. He had only read two or three lines before he slapped it shut again.

"Why do you bring me these things? Imprudent, that's what this is. I'm not going to read these. These are written by Fujimaki's mother!"

I'm sure I would have realized that this must be the case if I had given it a second thought. But it was Kyogokudo himself who had told me the older journals were more important. I offered this to him in my defense and he raised an eyebrow and practically spat at me.

"I said the ones around 1940 and 1941 were important. And we're missing the most important part, aren't we? I want to read about what happened then, not something his mother wrote when he was just a boy! That business is for Fujimaki to keep to himself in his warm little heart, not for us to paw our way through."

Kyogokudo picked out the journals written by Fujimaki's mother and swiftly removed them from the pile. "I'd say this whole journal-keeping endeavor began as an account of the young Fujimaki's development. His mother died toward the end of 1933—when he was eleven. It looks like she kept writing this diary even on her deathbed, and when she passed on, it became his. So to honor her memory, he kept writing it as his own journal—for the next eighteen years!"

Just then, a piece of paper that had been stuck between the pages of one of the notebooks came fluttering down to rest upon the tabletop. It was an old photograph: an image of a woman wearing a kimono.

A kimono! — Could it be Ryoko Kuonji?

"I-Is that a Kuon—"

"Huh?" Kyogokudo cut me off. "No, it's Fujimaki's late mother. What, you think this looks like that Kuonji girl?"

On closer examination, I found that, indeed, it wasn't an image of Ryoko, but of an older woman I had never seen before. She was an elegant lady. There was also a boy in the picture, sitting on her knee—probably the young Fujimaki himself. Peering at the details, it was easy to tell the woman apart

from Ryoko. But there was a resemblance there, all the same. Perhaps they gave the same first impression, if that's even possible for two different people to do. Both had that same air about them, that of a lovely, unspoiled young woman.

I said this to Kyogokudo.

"Wait, but which do you think she looks like? The older sister or the younger?"

"The sisters look so much alike, she looks like both of them," I said, dodging the question.

But it wasn't true.

Any image burned so emphatically in monochrome had to be Ryoko, not Kyoko.

Kyogokudo picked up the photograph and carefully reinserted it into the journal it had fallen out of. His face looked somewhat sad.

"Hmm. He wasn't Oedipal about it, but the Fujimaki I knew did miss his mother terribly. It was probably worse because he had lost his father at an even younger age. Maybe he was looking for his mother in the young Miss Kuonji?"

Ting, rang the wind chimes.

As if on cue, the cicadas begin to trill again outside. We sat there silently for a while, listening to them.

Eventually Kyogokudo cleaned up the mountain of journals. Then he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. "By the way, Sekiguchi, remember that *ubume* we were talking about?"

And just like that, the subject changed. Perhaps he, too, was looking for a break from the serious business of discussing our mutual friend.

"That business of writing the characters for '*kokakucho*' and reading them as '*ubume*'—apparently, Sekien based it on what it says in that book I mentioned, the *Record of All Things in China and Japan*—though to be exact, the *Record* says that *kokakucho* is to be read '*ubume bird*.' See? It's a bird. Which is what reminded me of a folk legend from the Hitachi* region about a monstrous bird that, if you left a baby's clothes hanging out to dry at night, would come and mark them with milk from its poisonous teats. That bird was locally called the '*ubame bird*,' incidentally. Rather close to the *kokakucho* of China, wouldn't you say? The Chinese one had the form of a woman, but it could become a bird by putting on some feathers, and it would mark the nightclothes of the female infant it wanted to steal with a spot of its own blood. Very similar. However, it seems that this whole business about the *ubume* being avian comes largely from the sound of its cry—not from any sort of eyewitness account. It's true

* Modern-day northern Ibaraki Prefecture.

that waterfowl do cry a bit like a baby, and that seems to have provoked some of the stories. There's one in *One Hundred Stories from Many Lands* where the people in a village hear a wailing sound night after night, like that of an infant, and everyone says it must be an *ubume*. The rumor spreads, and eventually a hero comes to do battle with the thing. Of course, in the end he finds that it's nothing but a blue heron.

"But here's the odd part. The whole crying connection doesn't really make sense, since we tend to think of the *infant* as crying, not the mother—yet the illustrations we find of the *ubume* all focus on the woman. Strange, huh? That's what I thought, until I remembered this..."

Kyogokudo picked up an old-looking clothbound book that had been resting on the tatami and held it up for me to see. "In the sixth chapter of Saikaku's *Life of a Woman*, our heroine is beleaguered by an *ubume*, shown here as a baby. An aborted-fetus spirit, to be precise—lots of them, in fact, standing all in a line, venting their anger."

—A frog's face...on a human infant.

"Are you listening? These things like children, wearing umbrella hats made of lotus leaves, drenched in blood from the waist down, lined up in a row, all ninety-odd of them, and cried *owariyo, owariyo*—carry us, carry us—and that is when I thought these are the *ubume* of which I have heard tell!"

I didn't like it. A shiver ran down my spine. Relishing my reaction, Kyogokudo continued. "So these lotus leaves that they're wearing are actually the placentas. You know, the whole concept of aborted fetuses coming back to haunt the living isn't particularly old—this is probably one of the earliest forms of the story, and it still owes much of its power to the *ubume*. Just think, nearly one hundred of them! And their cry isn't much different from the mother's, who's supposed to say '*wobaryo*,' right? There's a similar story about the *obariyon*—what they call the 'piggyback demon,' which, in shape, is like what Sekien calls a 'river child,' and in nature, it's somewhat like the *gogya*-crier of Shikoku. In Nagasaki, meanwhile, what they call an *ubume* is a sea witch, and in Echigo* they have a ghost that acts the same way, but looks like a spider. All this makes it very hard to pin down just what constitutes an *ubume*, doesn't it?"

"But just the other day, didn't you tell me that the *ubume* wasn't a ghost, but the manifestation of a woman's regrets upon dying in childbirth?"

"True, but think about it a moment. The dead don't have any regrets. It's the people left behind, the people still living, who have regrets."

"I'm not sure I understand. Why wouldn't the regrets be the woman's? She's the one who wanted to raise the baby, after all."

* Modern-day Niigata Prefecture.

"Wrong. The dead don't want or think about anything. They're just dead. It's the living who mope around, brooding about all the regrets the mother must be filled with, having died just as she was about to bring new life into the world. You have to admit that, generally speaking, it's the living who see ghosts, not the dead. In other words, the ones who determine the form in which a particular ghost appears are the living—the ones who see the ghost."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, the *ubume* a man like Sekien sees is a woman, the *ubume* a woman like Saikaku's heroine sees is a child, and the *ubume* that is only heard by villagers, but not seen, is a bird. Yet nonetheless all of these are recognized as being the same thing. I think it goes without saying, then, that the *ubume* is not what we would think of in our modern terms as a 'ghost.' Nor should we regard it as some psychic manifestation of a woman's regrets. We have to think of it in bigger terms if we're ever going to really understand it." My friend seemed oddly mournful as he spoke, and as I listened to his seemingly casual ethnographical ruminations, I couldn't help but wonder if this discussion was somehow an extension of our ongoing investigation into the goings-on at the Kuonji household.

I felt a chill wash over me.

"Okay, so what is it, then? What is the *ubume*?"

"I'd say it's the terrifying contradiction born of the differences between our maternal instincts, and those of animals. A kind of biological loathing, if you will."

Kyogokudo gazed out toward the veranda. The chirping of the cicadas suddenly stopped. "Have you heard the story about the monkey?" he asked suddenly, without looking back at me.

"What story about the monkey?"

"An old mother monkey with two children is caught in a storm. She slips on a riverbank and they are all swept away by a torrent. Of her two children, one is a tiny baby, unable to swim on his own. The other is still a child, but able to swim. The flow of the water is swift, so much so that even the life of the mother is in danger."

"Sounds like quite the pinch."

"Quite. Now, if you are the mother, which of the two children do you save?"

"Well, both, I suppose."

"You can save only one. If you try to save both of them, you'll all die."

"Okay, then I'd pick the smaller one. The older one can swim by himself, right?"

"So you would, but the mother monkey saves the larger child without hesitation. Why? The mother can no longer produce offspring. And it will take time until the younger monkey comes into its reproductive own. The

best chance for the continued survival of the family is the larger child. Such are the maternal instincts of an animal. If she risks it all by saving the smaller child, her own life becomes uncertain. The chances of escaping with the larger child alone are far greater. Mere emotional attachment can never hope to win against genetic marching orders. Not that the monkey has emotional attachment as we think of it, anyway; what she does is the only natural thing for an animal to do.

"But mankind is different. We have to be—we've reached a point where the preservation of the species has ceased to be an overriding concern. Call it culture, intellect, or humanism—whatever you like. We lords of all creation, in our arrogance, have created another set of values for ourselves. As long as it points the same way as our animal instincts, we're fine. But when our new values point in the opposite direction, we become confused. Ghosts and monsters are born to fill the gap between the two."

"Okay," I said, "so all living things exist solely to produce offspring. And their children are born to bear children of their own in turn. But if the only purpose of living is the preservation of one's species, doesn't that mean that there is no intrinsic meaning to life itself? If that's the case, then what do we live for?"

"Nothing. There is no meaning to life. Carrying on, that's all it is. Rather, that's all it's become."

Ting-a-ling...

The wind chimes fluttered in a sudden breeze.

Kyogokudo rose silently and went to the kitchen to fetch some cold barley tea. Returning to his seat, he handed me a cup. "Sekiguchi. I'm starting to think that our little discussion about the *ubume* may be more important than we realized," he said. "It's an aborted fetus, Sekiguchi. Not quite alive, not truly dead—an ambiguous, indistinct space between the lines nicely filled by the *ubume*."

"An aborted fetus! What you mean an aborted fetus? What are you trying to say?"

"Bear with me a moment. Look, what if the Kuonji girl had gotten pregnant by Fujimaki? Purely conjecture, of course, but it's certainly possible, yes?"

"You're saying that Kyoko got pregnant—what, way back when?"

"What if the 'vague fear that became realized' in Fujimaki's New Year's journal entry was a letter informing him of a pregnancy? If they'd met late at night twenty times or so, I'd say it's quite possible—likely, even."

"Right. So he worries about it for a month, and then, in February, goes to ask for her hand in marriage!"

"Didn't her father say that Fujimaki claimed there was some reason he *had* to marry her? A child on the way sounds like a pretty good reason to me. And then, later in the journals—"

"The 'child who must be dead by now'—right. So they got married, and he wanted to find out what had happened to his child conceived before the war. But Kyoko didn't remember a thing."

"Right. So he begins to suspect his new bride of some kind of memory impairment. He probably asked her several times about that love letter, too. What did she say, again, when you mentioned it to her?"

Why do you ask me the same thing he asked me—the thing only he knows!

"Huh, you know, the pieces do fit. But then, why wouldn't she remember anything? I mean, even if *she* somehow forgot the whole episode, the family surely would have known."

"I don't know whether she miscarried or had an abortion. But what if the family didn't know who the father was? They're a pretty old-fashioned lot: stubborn father, strict mother, right? I'm sure they wouldn't go around openly revealing their daughter's past indiscretions to their newly adopted son. They're nowhere near as progressive as that. Especially since adopting Fujimaki must have seemed like the perfect chance for them to right their teetering family fortunes. I suspect they would have done everything they could to hide the family skeletons, especially those concerning their daughter's dark past."

It all made sense.

I found myself increasingly convinced that my friend's conjecture was right on the money. It certainly felt more real than anything I'd heard from any of the Kuonjis thus far, and I said as much to Kyogokudo.

"Still, I don't know..." he muttered, sighing. "Even if that's what happened, it's strange."

"Strange? Really?"

"Really strange. Even if we assume that Fujimaki felt guilty for impregnating this girl in the full blush of her youth, he did eventually marry her, right? That should have set things straight, but on the contrary, we find him agonizing about his sins until his final day. That doesn't fit. Not with all the money he brings to the deal, not with what he says and does afterwards—it's just strange."

Just then, there was a sound at the front door.

Kyogokudo had a visitor.

Muttering, my friend stood and walked off toward the entrance hall.

The unexpected guest was Shutaro Kiba.

"Hey, you. What time do you think it is, anyway? Your store should have been open for hours by now. I was beginning to think I was going to walk in here and find your body entwined with that of your lover in some bizarre double suicide case—and who do I find but... Why, hello there, Captain Sekiguchi. Sergeant Kiba reporting for duty, sir!"

Kiba made a playful salute as I stood up from the tatami. Kiba always looked odd to me, no matter how many times I saw him—those strangely overhanging jowls, that close-cropped needle-stiff hair, that pointed nose in the middle of a perfectly square face; his eyes seemed undersized and his mouth looked as though it had been stuck on as an afterthought. And tough—not just his face, but his torso, thick like the trunk of an ancient tree, and his arms, like heavy branches. He was a big man. Yet his voice was incongruously delicate and high-pitched; and he was surprisingly witty, though you might not even notice it at first. A strange fellow all around.

Kiba and I had seen heavy fighting in the southern theater during the war, and more than our share of dead comrades. Though it's hard to believe, looking back on it now, I had been given an officer's rank because I was a high school graduate, complete with my own platoon to lead. Kiba, on the other hand, was a career soldier who'd spent his life working up the ranks, though when the war came his still fell beneath mine. For all his experience, he had been under my command. In most cases, that sort of situation would have led to endless torment for the commanding officer, but for some reason, Kiba didn't fit that mold. Instead, he guided and supported me the whole way. In the end, almost my entire platoon save myself and Kiba had died honorable deaths—which is to say they had met a grisly end in battle—while we were by some miracle saved to stand once again on the soil of our homeland.

By coincidence, Kiba had also known Enokizu from the time they were kids. He was the son of a stonecutter in Koishikawa, which made his association with the pampered scion of a noble house unfathomable, but there it was. For that reason, we had managed to stay in touch even after returning to civilian life.

"Greetings, boss. I might well ask you what you are doing here at this hour. I'd suppose you probably have a busier schedule than a used-book salesman, or an unemployed writer," Kyogokudo said. He waved Kiba toward one of the cushions, and then, still raging, went off to the kitchen to fetch a fresh glass of barley tea. We always addressed Kiba as "boss" those days. Not because he was an officer of the law—the word just seem to fit his persona.

"I'll not have anyone comparing me, a public authority, with the two-bit literary likes of you, thank you very much. As it happens, that fool Enokizu phoned me this morning, and—he being how he is—I had no idea what he was talking about. But he sounded quite agitated, and he said something

about 'that ape-man Seki' being in hot water, and told me I had to go help him before things got worse. I didn't follow what the problem was, but I did catch that it had something to do with the Kuonji Clinic. Well, thought I, this is something I have to look into, so I went over to Seki's place—but then his wife came out and said he was here. So here I am, quick as can be, paying a little friendly visit. Understood?" As soon as he'd finished, he raised the cup of barley tea to his lips and drained it in one gulp.

"What do you know about the Kuonji Clinic that made this something you had to 'look into'?" Kyogokudo demanded. Kiba snorted and tossed what looked like a rolled-up magazine onto the table.

It was a tabloid of the worst sort, a gossip rag called *True Tales of the Bizarre*. An illustration of a nude woman sprawled across the cover beneath a series of garish teasers:

Kishimojin, devourer of babies!

She is a sexual predator, but what grows inside her now?

Is it a serpent...or a demon?

I felt my face flush red. Someone had done it—they'd written the article we'd all been fearing. The rumor had spread that far, then. In an industry that survived by scandal-mongering to the masses, it was actually surprising no one had broken the story sooner. After all, I had been considering writing about it myself not two or three days before. How differently I felt now. What would this mean for the case? For the family?

Kyogokudo made a sour face and picked up the magazine. He opened it and scanned a few pages. "So tell me, boss, what's this business about the missing infants?"

"Oh, that's all in there too," Kiba growled. "There were three lawsuits filed between summer and winter of the year before last. Babies that should have been born, gone missing. Suspicious, right? And all from the same clinic. So I got right on it. Man, but that old bald guy's got some balls on him. I go in there and he's cool as a cucumber. Says it's all a misunderstanding. They were stillbirths, and the remains had been delivered to the families. And then his high and lofty wife comes out, and says how they're all sorry for the parents' loss, but that doesn't mean people should go making such accusations. Whatever, I thought, and I kept on the case. I was about to get a search warrant and give their house the once-over."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because all three plaintiffs dropped charges, that's why. That's even more suspicious, if you ask me. But I can't go investigating where there's no charge, can I? Imagine how bad I felt after all that."

—Another rumor that's been going around about the very same clinic where the vanishing took place... The man in question wasn't the first to vanish! Several newborn babies are said to have disappeared before him.

So this was the story behind that rumor. Atsuko's editor Nakamura had mentioned. I felt a shadow of helplessness fall over me. The damp thicket of mysteries growing over the Kuonji Clinic was bigger and deeper than I had imagined.

Kyogokudo sat silently for a while, perusing *True Tales of the Bizarre*. Then he looked up with a scowl and thrust it toward me, still open. "This is even more worthless than I thought," he spat. "Don't tell me you read this crap all the time, Kiba."

"I read what I want to, thank you very much. Hell, if it helps with a case, I'll read anything—be it a Buddhist sutra or the graffiti on your wall. In fact, that rag right there is pretty good compared to some. There were a whole bunch of others talking about the Kuonjis, too, but the writing was so unbearable even I couldn't justify buying them."

A whole bunch! I wondered how many that was as I tried to pin down the emotion rising inside me—something like anger, or maybe more like being morbidly embarrassed in front of a large crowd.

The contents of the article were a textbook example of libelous slander:

A certain K. Clinic in Zoshigaya—as if hiding the name did any good—is home to a girl so obsessed with men that at the mere sight of one she flies into a lustful rage, her wanton behavior too lurid to recount in any detail—this, of course, was followed by a long, explicit description of her various supposed transgressions—and as the years of lechery run on she has become a creature of wickedness, stealing the children of others to drain their warm blood and wring their fat to make her philters of seduction. The infants she has murdered are beyond counting, and now, cursed by them, she grows heavy with a demon child, still unborn now in the 20th month of her pregnancy. Swollen with evil like none before, she is now a truly disturbing sight, the reincarnation of Kishimojin herself—

It was horrible. Horrible beyond words. And it went on.

One theory holds that her husband, having tried everything to curb her wanton ways without success, resorted to the use of Yan Wang magic. Yet he failed, and instead of drawing the evil in her out, he himself was sucked inside her belly—

"What's 'Yan Wang magic'?" I asked.

Kyogokudo gave me a dubious look. "Well, there was a king named Yan Wang back during the Zhou Dynasty in China. There was something about him having been born from an egg, if I remember correctly. He apparently was something of a sage, and ran a virtuous enough government, but there were all these stories of strange behavior. But I don't remember anything about magic that could backfire in such a dramatic way as to put a man inside a woman's belly. Maybe I'm just uninformed. Still, you have to hand it to

whoever wrote this, with their 'reincarnation of Kishimojin' and this magic mumbo-jumbo they pulled out of somewhere. Quite imaginative." My friend chuckled wryly.

I concluded with relief that if he hadn't heard of anything like the rumored magic spell it had probably been the author's fearful invention.

Just then Kiba butted in, a peculiar expression on his face. "Hey, Kyogokudo," he said. "I always thought Kishimojin was the goddess of conception. Is that wrong? Is she some kind of demon like they're saying? Why the hell would people go pray to her if she is?"

Kyogokudo scratched the bridge of his nose two or three times before replying. I could see him mentally pulling out the soapbox, taking his position. The floor was his, and he knew it.

"Excellent question, boss. You see, Kishimojin was originally the goddess 'Hariti' or Kariteimo—the wife of some Indian demon-god. She had other names: 'the blue demon,' or 'Daiyakusha'nyo,' or sometimes just 'the evil woman.' Yet for all her evilness, she had five hundred children. Impressive, eh?"

"Even so, every day she would steal someone else's child and devour it. Of course, people objected, and pretty soon the Buddha showed up and took away one of her kids, a boy named Piyanakara. Well, Kariteimo wailed and moaned and carried on, let me tell you. Personally, I wouldn't think there'd be much difference between five hundred kids and four hundred ninety-nine, but she's a mother, and even one child missing is too many. So she was almost mad with grief. Well, who should appear before her but the Buddha, stern of aspect as one might imagine, and he asks her how she could be so sad missing only one of five hundred. How would she feel if she only had one child, and that child had been eaten? You see where he was going with this. Anyway, the upshot is that Kariteimo realizes what she's done, bows her head in regret, converts to Buddhism, becomes one of the protector deities of the religion, and is later revered as one of the Buddha's own kin; and that's where she is today."

"Sounds to me like Buddha goes light on the punishments. If I were in charge of her, she'd be doing hard time," Kiba muttered gruffly, causing Kyogokudo to grin.

"Ah," he said, "but that's the Buddhist way, boss. Your rigid, unwavering religions like Christianity—any religion of nomads, or an invading people—have to have a certain aggressiveness in order for it to survive. Its people conquer new territory, and they want to suppress the local beliefs. They beat them into the ground when they can. Thus the local gods become demons, their gatherings become the Witches' Sabbath, and their rites the Black Mass. Whatever remains of the old religion becomes the work of the Antichrist. For example, the demon Paphomed, known as the Black Lamb of the Sabbath, is really nothing more than a denigrated form of the Islamic prophet Moham-

med—indigenous beliefs recast to serve the conquerors' needs.

"But Buddhism has a far more flexible structure. Some might call it a little too loose. You see, where other religions reject, Buddhism absorbs. When Buddhists come to a new area they fuse their beliefs with those of the locals. There were other religions in India, for example: Brahmanism and Hinduism, right? Well the Brahman gods became the gods of Buddhist heaven, and the Hindu gods became the *vidyaraaja*. All were absorbed into the new order. Kariteimo was one of those. You can read all about it in the Buddhist scripture called *The Basis of Vowed Morality*, if you like, but the point I'm trying to make is that while Buddhists might occasionally do a little badmouthing of the local deities, they lift them right back up again—clever, no? It was pretty typical for gods in those days to have a good side and a bad side anyway; since they're two-sided entities by nature, it was pretty easy for the people writing these tales to just denounce the bad and praise the good."

"Just hearing you talk makes my head hurt—I've had enough of Iriya Kishimojin," Kiba said, repeating an old pun by Shokusanjin, a comic from the last century—though I doubt he knew where the saying had come from.* He probably couldn't have written the first character in Shokusanjin's name to save his life. The detective was making a visible effort to put the chaos in his head in order. "So the Buddha taught this goddess about motherly love. And she's a good goddess now?"

"That's not what I'm saying. See, Kariteimo was originally widely worshiped as a good goddess, patron deity of conception, child rearing, and all that. In fact she was sometimes called the 'mother of heaven,' or 'mother-who-loves-her-child'—you can read that in the *Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in the Southern Seas*. In other words, her nature didn't change one bit from how it was before Buddhism came into the picture."

Kyogokudo was managing to list off an impressive array of books that I—let alone Kiba—had never heard of.

"Just tell me whether she's good or bad!" Kiba said, his face growing hard.

But Kyogokudo, ever the willow in the wind, kept talking calmly, unwilling to relinquish control over the pace of the conversation.

"Like I said, she's both. The Buddhists couldn't really touch that. Not that they would want to—after all, if you look at Buddhist teachings, you see that affection is only an impediment to enlightenment. Why would the Buddha encourage something like that?"

"Why not?" Kiba and I asked at the same time.

"Look, Buddhism tells us to discard the whole concept of love. Love is attachment, after all. And you have to discard all attachments in order to

transcend this reality and get on the path to becoming a Buddha. That's why we'd probably be better off interpreting the moral of Kariteimo's story as being 'get rid of your unwarranted attachment to your children.' If you throw away everything and convert to Buddhism, all your sins will be absolved, and you will become enlightened. Like Shinran* said, 'Even the good person attains Buddha-hood. How much more so the evil.'"

I laid the magazine I'd been clutching on the tatami and said, before I could stop myself, "So Buddhism is telling us to deny our humanity, is that it? If that's true, then, according to you, wouldn't monkeys be closer to enlightenment than us?"

"They would," Kyogokudo said simply. "Animals aren't as easily distracted, after all. Maybe they are further along the path to enlightenment by their nature. However, an animal can never actually attain Buddha-hood. Animals can't stop being animals, after all. You can never be truly enlightened unless you relinquish your attachment to life itself, which is something no animal can do. In other words, Buddhism doesn't teach us to deny humanity, it wants us to transcend humanity."

"You mean Buddhism wants us to die."

I felt empty, hollow. And it wasn't just Kishimojin's fault.

"No need to be so disparaging. Everyone has their own way of interpreting these things. Buddhism went from 'lesser vehicle' to 'great vehicle' Buddhism for the sake of people like you, you know. What I'm saying is that the worship of Kishimojin in Japan really owes more to Brahmanism than Buddhism. In the end, Kishimojin—which is to say, Kariteimo—didn't discard any of her attachments. She kept on loving her children, didn't she? Which is exactly why so many people still worship her today. In fact—didn't the monk Nichiren worship Kishimojin? That temple there, Homyoji Temple, belongs to the Nichiren sect, doesn't it?"

"That's it!" Kiba practically shouted. "Homyoji Temple! I know this might surprise you, but I didn't come here for a lecture on Kishimojin's adventures in India. I came here to talk about the Kishimojin shrine that's part of the Homyoji Temple in Zoshigaya! Hey—" He looked at each of us in turn. "Just what *are* you two involved in?"

Somehow, Kiba had managed to force the conversation back on topic. Admittedly, I was reluctant to tell him everything about the Kuonji case. But, now that it had come to it, there was no turning back; so I told him, in fits and starts, everything that had happened over the last few days. Somewhat surprisingly, Kiba was an excellent listener, and he grasped the salient points of my explanation much more quickly than Enokizu or Kyogokudo had.

The detective snorted as soon as he'd heard me out. "That clinic—I al-

*The pun is based on the second half of the phrase "*asore iriya*" ("how shocking!") which in turn sounds like "Iriya," a place in Tokyo famous for its Kishimojin temple.

*A Japanese Buddhist monk living from 1173 to 1263. Noted theologian, and founder of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) sect of Buddhism.

ways thought it smelled funny, but now that the lid's off I'm finding it to be a real nest for all manner of unpleasant things."

"I don't know, I think that's going a bit far. I mean, sure, there is a whiff of shadiness to the whole operation—"

"Sekiguchi, there's no need for you to defend the place. I might not be able to arrest someone for being suspicious, but until the real criminal is identified, everyone there is under suspicion. I'm just afraid you've reached the limits of amateur detective work—and by that I mean both you and Enokizu." Kiba pulled a folding fan out of his back pocket and began to fan himself.

"So has our admittedly amateur detective story provided professional criminal investigator Kiba with any clues?" Kyogokudo asked smugly. He was either flattering Kiba or making a fool of him. Possibly both.

"Well, that's the thing," Kiba began, re-crossing his legs on the cushion and looking at me. "A crime isn't the sort of thing that you commit because you can, or don't because you can't. First, you have to have a motive. Whether it's possible or not comes *after* that. And from what I've heard, neither of you has given motive a second thought here."

"Yes, of course," Kyogokudo said, grinning. "Did you hear that, Sekiguchi? This kind officer in the Tokyo Police has just told us something of profound importance. I hope you were listening."

I had been listening, in fact, and Kiba's words had been like a knife, pricking at something inside me, something uncomfortably like guilt.

How had I felt before going into the Kuonji Clinic?

Shouldn't I have been cooler-headed than anyone else, more objective?

Yet I'd gotten so wrapped up in what was happening that I had been trying to solve the case myself, although it was Enokizu who had gotten the call. I should have been nothing more than a concerned bystander, but Enokizu's outrageous and often downright unintelligible behavior had pushed me and pulled me until I was a full participant—as subjectively a part of the case as I could get. In the end, I hadn't been trying to solve the case at all. I'd been trying to solve my own problems.

What good had I done the client, anyway? What good had I done Ryoko Kuonji?

—*Save me.*

The family was now reviled, their scandal spread far and wide. The detestable magazine leered at me from the tatami, a symbol of my incompetence if ever there was one.

"No need to look so serious. You're just an amateur, that's all. What I'm saying is, listen to the pro," Kiba settled himself on the cushion once more, a signal that the real lecture was about to begin.

"Let's look at what's happened: first, a husband has disappeared from his house. I'd say this is probably true, 'cause he's gone. Second, the family calls it a vanishing. These are the only facts—everything else is conjecture based on testimony. Leaving that idiot Enokizu out of the picture for now, you and Kyogokudo's sister more or less believed everything the family said, and conducted your investigation based on those premises. That's the first problem. There's no shred of proof that the man actually vanished, they just *say* he did. This is where we need to come up with a motive. That's first—all the business about sealed rooms and whatnot comes later.

"Did the husband have a motive for disappearing? I have my doubts. It's hard to say, since we lack sufficient information, but there's certainly nothing I can see that points to a motive. And if he didn't disappear of his own free will, then something happened *to* him—somebody whacked him, or threw him in a hole somewhere to rot. If that's our hypothesis, then we need a perpetrator, and our only candidates for that role right now come from within the clinic—because we have no other suspects, we first have to cast our suspicions on them, and believe me there's lots warranting further scrutiny. First, take the wife. There's a good possibility she's been getting some on the side with this young physician's apprentice. That right there is motive enough. Next, look at the employees. Okay, it's hard to think why any of them would have direct cause to harm the adopted son of the family. That old servant, his loyalty to the family tradition runs deeper than most. It's clear he would listen to anything the master of the house—by which I mean Mrs. High-And-Mighty, not Old Baldy—happens to say. Which gets me thinking about Mrs. Kuonji and her shiny-pated husband. Now there's a suspicious couple for you."

"How so?"

"Money, first of all. I wouldn't be surprised to find some glaring inconsistencies in their ledger books with regards to how they used Fujimaki's money. Add to that their entirely inexplicable claim that he had some sort of grudge against them. It's like they're admitting they did some harm to the man. And the fishiest part of all is this business of the missing infants—well, murdered infants, I say."

"You think that's connected?" I asked.

"How could it not be?" Kiba countered.

"In which case this would have absolutely nothing to do with the bizarre affliction of the younger daughter, our friend's wife, would it?" Kyogokudo asked.

"Of course not. I'm no doctor, but a disease is a disease. It's not something you get because you want to, or somebody else wants you to. It's when you throw things like that into the mix that everything gets confused. In any case it sounds like her prolonged pregnancy came as a surprise to the parents, and now they think it's the work of the vanished husband getting back at them in

revenge for whatever they did to him. That's my take on it."

"What about Ryoko, the elder daughter? I wouldn't think there'd be any suspicion on her. Especially considering that she was the one who came looking for a private investigator. Shouldn't she be taken off from the list of suspects?"

—*Save me.*

Those words, at least, hadn't been a lie.

"On the contrary, that right there is suspicious," Kiba said flatly. "First of all, she goes to this ridiculous private eye's place to ask for an investigation fully a year and a half after the disappearance. If that's not dubious I don't know what is. Now, a private eye is a businessman, so if you go to him with a job to find a missing person, that's what he'll set out to do. He'll begin with preconceived notions, in other words. From the outset he'll start coming up with predictions about what he's going to find. And when he finally gets down to the actual detecting, there's this utterly fantastical sealed-room scenario waiting for him. So immediately he'll start trying to make what he finds jibe with his predictions, wondering just how someone could escape from that sealed room. This is the problem."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm guessing there was an obvious way to get out of that room."

"Wait a second, Kiba. I checked that place out."

Kiba narrowed his eyes at me. He clearly doubted my investigative abilities. But it hadn't been just me who investigated that sealed room; the far more levelheaded Atsuko Chuzenji had spent more time on the quandary than I. I mentioned this to Kiba.

"Yes, from what I've heard, Kyogoku's sister probably did a fine job, but all she did was investigate the room from the outside. What good does that do? This second sealed room is suspect. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some trick that would be obvious once you were inside—though I'm sure that wouldn't prevent an amateur like you from missing it. My point, in any case, is that had Enokizu been any good, he would have found the way out of that sealed room immediately. Which would mean that this adopted son actually could have left the room without anybody seeing him."

"I see," Kyogokudo said with unmasked enthusiasm. "So what you're saying is that if Fujimaki really has been killed, the Kuonjis could use a detective to 'prove' that he was still alive by showing that he could have left the room of his own free will—thereby vanishing!"

Would that make Ryoko a co-conspirator?

No. She hadn't been lying. I was sure of it.

Kyogokudo evidently felt differently. "In other words, you're saying the whole family was involved? That certainly would remove the mystery from

the equation, if all of them were lying."

"That it would. But whoever it was, they picked the wrong man for the job. Their luck ran out when they settled on that idiot Enokizu as their decoy detective. Instead of a carefully crafted alibi, they've ended up with a tangled mess. They bring in this guy to divert attention from what they've done, and suddenly, without any proof at all, he starts saying that the vanished husband is dead. So they panic. I'm sure they were quite relieved when Enokizu abandoned them halfway, leaving the far more amiable detective Sekiguchi behind to handle the case. But of course, they expected too much."

"Wait a second, Kiba. I know I'm an amateur, and I might have missed something. But can you tell me what they could possibly hope to gain from making a dead Fujimaki appear to be alive? You keep talking about motives, so what's the motive there?"

"Oh, I don't think it's some lover's quarrel, or some mercenary calculation to cover up a financial mess. No, I think the entire family is trying to pin the killing of those infants on their adopted son. That's what I think."

This was the most outrageous and most frightening thing I'd heard yet.

"Look, let's assume first that the wife and the young doctor-in-training had it going on, and the adopted son got in the way. Pretty plausible, right? Her lover kills the husband—nothing unusual there. But what follows next doesn't follow. There's no need to put together the whole ridiculous sealed-room production, for one thing. And if for some reason they did want to, they're lacking players. It would be hard for just the two of them to pull off, as you yourselves figured out. So then we have to assume that the other employees were in on it too. That would certainly let the lovers put on whatever sort of show they wanted, but it's hard to imagine the employees having some pressing reason to help a miscreant daughter and her young lover cover up a murder. No, the only people who could order the employees around are the fat old man and his tempestuous wife. Now if there was nothing suspicious about them, I might put such conjecture aside, but here we have this unanswered question of the vanished infants. According to what you've told me, the missing husband was adopted into the family in June of the year before last, and he disappeared in January of last year, right? That overlaps perfectly with this other case." Kiba pulled out a notebook and checked some dates. "Yeah, the first infant went missing in July the year before last, the second was in September of that year, and the third in November."

If Kiba's hypothesis was correct, then I was going to come out of this looking like a clown. But something still didn't sit right with me. His story was off somehow; I was sure of it.

I was overlooking something—something very important.

"What I think is that the husband caught wind of the case of the miss-

ing infants. So they dealt with him. But then the daughter comes down with this bizarre malady, and the rumors begin to spread. That won't do, so they try to tidy everything up by placing it squarely on the shoulders of their poor adopted son."

"Now *you're* making a conjecture," I said, unable to restrain myself any longer. "You're the one with preconceived notions here, boss. We don't know those infants were killed. Even if some newborns really did go missing, it wouldn't necessarily mean that they were murdered. And if the family didn't kill them, then they wouldn't have to 'whack' Fujimaki to cover it up!"

"You're right, it's a conjecture. But Sekiguchi, conjectures can be effective as long as you don't fall into your opponent's trap. You can use them as a guide when you go looking for your proof. And if you can't find proof, then you know you made a mistake and you can backtrack. Either way, you can't do an investigation without any idea of what you're looking for."

"Kamikaze police work at its best," Kyogokudo interjected, garnering a sharp glare from the detective. Kiba's glare packed considerable punch; I surely would have flinched if I'd been in Kyogokudo's shoes—but the bookseller went on, as calm as could be. "You may be quite right, boss. Remember what I told you before, Sekiguchi, there is no such thing as perfect objectivity. You may get more accurate results by proceeding with an awareness of your own subjectivity. Of course, all this is predicated on whether those missing infants really are missing."

After a moment's confusion, Kiba appeared to decide that Kyogokudo was supporting his position, and his mood considerably improved.

"I think that it *did* happen, and I have three reasons to think so. The first is that the three couples who made the claims did so independently, without knowing each other. One claim came from the house of a wounded field officer from Itabashi. The second was made by the head of a trading business based in Kamijujo and his wife. And the third came from a bartender in Ikebukuro. I did a detailed background check on all of them, and there was no trace of any of the three having had any connection to each other before they made their claims. That would seem to suggest that these three charges were entirely independent of one another, which makes it unlikely that they were some kind of coordinated harassment; and it seems pretty improbable that they happened so close together by pure coincidence.

"My second reason is that I don't know the whereabouts of the nurses involved. All of the nurses who were working there at the time of the incidents—there were four of them employed at the time of the births in question—they all quit soon afterward. And get this: no one is really sure where they went. I went looking for one of them, and apparently she went back to her hometown, but there the trail ends. Pretty suspicious, if you ask me.

"As for the last reason—well, Kyogoku, this is really more your specialty

than mine." Kiba turned his gaze to the used bookseller. "I gotta ask: what do people mean when they talk about hereditary possession?"

—*You don't suppose her family has a history of possession, do you?*

Kyogokudo's words resurfaced in my mind.

The bookseller made an understandably sour face. "I don't suppose there have been rumors to that effect?"

"There have. Pretty wild ones, at that." Kiba gave an exaggerated shake of his head. "I'm not fond of the topic myself, as you might guess. It's not that I outright don't believe it, and it's not that I do. I don't like it because I don't know what to think. My old woman went through a period when she was into spells and divinations and all that. She went around worrying about which direction to face all day, and making sure she did the right things at the right times. It's funny. You know it's ridiculous, and yet you can't help thinking about it. It gets in your way. And there's no legal recourse if you're dealing with monsters or gods, now, is there? Not really my arena of operations."

"So what information do you have? Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, it came from an investigation I requested from the office with jurisdiction in Kagawa down in Shikoku. I didn't expect them to come up with much, seeing how it's been a good seventy years since the Kuonji family moved up from there to Tokyo, but I thought I might as well cover the bases..." Kiba flipped through his notebook. "Turns out that the Kuonjis did throw their weight around as the appointed physicians to the local castle lord, but in the village they originally came from, they'd been ostracized. No friends, and certainly no suitors, so they left not a single relative behind. The reason? A history of possession."

"What exactly was doing the possessing?"

"I hadn't heard of it before, but they said it was something called an *oshobo*."

"*Oshobo*?" Kyogokudo echoed. "That's a child-spirit from the Sanuki region in northeastern Shikoku. A kind of domestic haunt that attaches itself to normal families. Something like the *zashiki-warashi* child-spirits in Tohno up north. I had no idea it could be hereditary."

"Hey, Kyogoku. First explain to me what this whole hereditary possession business *is*. Is it similar to regular possession—like when people say they've been possessed by a fox?"

"Not quite. Typically, people in a house with a history of possession aren't the ones being possessed, but the *possessors*. That is to say, they send a fox or whatever it is to possess people they don't like. You've probably heard of stories where someone has a fox familiar they use to get revenge. The hereditary kind is the same idea, just think of it as a custom passed down from one generation to the next. People in the family use their spirit familiars to possess others

and make them miserable. Do this in any kind of community and you'll run out of friends pretty fast. A family with that reputation soon becomes ostracized. No one talks to them, and certainly no one marries into the family line, because that would mean the children would pick up the curse."

I'd had enough of this. "Ah, right," I said, "that would make all kinds of sense...if it wasn't complete nonsense! You're talking ghost stories from feudal times, Kyogokudo. Superstition! This is 1952!" I turned to the detective. "If you believe this stuff, Kiba, you are just as crazy as he is!"

"Sekiguchi, I'm afraid you're simply uninformed," Kyogokudo replied. "The tradition of hereditary possession continues to be deeply rooted in our culture to this day. So deeply that it can't be ignored." His voice was sharp. "Hereditary possession is one of many devices found in folk society. Whenever something not easily understood or seemingly irrational occurs in the community, there are social devices that are used to explain it. Just as no ogre is born without an unusual birth, no misfortune befalls a village without it being the fault of some family, of hereditary possession."

"But isn't the idea of possession just a way of explaining the symptoms of some neurosis? Getting abnormally agitated, or becoming psychologically ill—those things happen because of some imbalance in the individual. It's not something you can cause in someone else!"

"It's dangerous to think of possession as purely a medical phenomenon, though the symptoms do fall within your field of expertise—psychology and neurology. That's just one side of it. You can also take an ethnographer's approach to the issue. An ethnographer would tell you that hereditary possession came to us through the influence of mainland traditions, such as *onmyodo* divination, and *kodo*—the art of commanding animal spirits—or our system of folk beliefs centered on Inari, the rice-god. But this is just a historical explanation; it doesn't offer to explain why people go mad, which is the most common symptom of possession."

"That's true. If you take that whole confusing ethnographical mess out of the equation, all you're left with is a simple disease. Psychosis, or neurosis."

"Yes, but that's only one aspect of possession, not the whole thing. All you can explain with a medical approach are the *symptoms* of being possessed. You can't get a handle on factors like the rise and fall of families and the uneven distribution of wealth—and thereby you fail to grasp the whole picture, which must by necessity include those considerations, too."

"You know what I think? I think the social device of possession came into being when a new system of value—the money economy—was introduced to the community. Up until then, the only source of wealth was the harvest. The entire community shared one fate, be it good or bad. But once you see a widespread use of currency, distribution of wealth within the community becomes uneven. Some parts of the communal body become wealthy, while

others wither. There arises the need for a device, a means of accounting for and ultimately eliminating that discrepancy. And so people called on stories of divine possession from antiquity, and the concept of animal possession was born. It's a system for replacing something intangible, be it an economic situation or other social conflict, with something very clear and immediate—perfect for explaining hard-to-swallow realities.

"Really, it was inevitable that possession as we know it developed as it did in Japan. The foundation had been laid; all the proper conditions were there. Which is to say: the psycho-neurotic side of the phenomenon of possession is subsumed by the ethnological side, whether you think of the latter as 'culture' or simply societal conditions. You can't understand possession in this country without taking both sides into account."

"That all makes sense," I lied. "But didn't you say that families with a history of hereditary possession are possessing *other* people? How does that translate into symptoms they themselves are affected by?"

Kyogokudo raised an eyebrow. "A good question—and yet psychoses and neuroses *do* run in families with histories of possession. There are statistics for it, even. Of course, there are exceptions, and if we take social prejudices out of the equation the situation might look somewhat less bleak, but that is the current unhappy state of affairs. Possession is not a simple individual illness. Culture and social conditions are deeply entwined in the phenomenon."

Kyogokudo and Kiba were entirely calm, yet I felt myself growing increasingly agitated.

"That's it. Hasn't the Kuonji line passed down through the women? They've been taking adopted husbands for generations. Wouldn't the bloodline have died out a long time ago?"

"Have I ever told you what an odd bird you are, Sekiguchi? No matter. As it turns out, hereditary possession tends to pass down maternal lines. That's why marrying into the family is such a taboo."

"Okay, but—"

No. This has nothing to do with anything.

"—Kyogokudo, this has nothing to do with the case! That's what I'm trying to say here!"

It was Kiba who answered my outburst. "Actually, it does, Sekiguchi. I don't claim to understand all of Kyogoku's hocus pocus, mind you. But according to the district bureau's report, the local old folks down there say that this *oshobo* thing the Kuonjis were supposedly sickening on people they didn't like isn't a fox spirit at all—it's the ghost of a child dead before birth."

My mind went blank.

"I see," Kyogokudo said, his hushed voice breaking the silence. "So that's the story behind the *oshobo*-possession. That makes sense. People who use dog-

spirits to do their dirty work need dog-spirits, the so-called 'pipe-witches' need their pipe-foxes, and the inheritors of the *oshobo* line need to keep *oshobo*—dead children, in other words—around to do their bidding." Kyogokudo nodded, but then he crossed his arms and frowned. "It's just, I've never heard of that particular form of possession passing down generations."

"Well, the district bureau says it does," Kiba said. "In fact, the old folks they interviewed down there claimed the Kuonjis have been killing babies for a long time—they didn't understand why we should be all surprised about it now. Like you say," he nodded to me, "I'm sure this is all discrimination based on superstition. Certainly nothing that gives us proof of any wrongdoing. Still, don't the parts seem to fit just a little too well? Made a shiver run down my spine, I'll tell you what. I mean, if some family really is systematically killing babies in this day and age, well, something's got to be done about it. Am I wrong? We aren't in the rice paddies of Sanuki now, after all. We're in the Imperial City of Tokyo!"

"Where possession is alive and well, I might mention," Kyogokudo said. "It's in the very expressions we use to talk about luck. Whether we're saying we're *tsuiteiru* or our *tsuki* has run out—we're using forms of the same verb used to talk about possession: *tsuku*. In other words, we're 'possessed' by good luck. It's just shorthand for an older saying: 'a fox possessed my foe, and brought me fortune.' So when the man winning a game of cards says he's lucky, what he's really saying is that he's effectively become a temporary 'possessor' and sent his spirit minions to thief away his opponent's chips. So much for writing off these beliefs as some local idiosyncrasy!"

"And that's grounds for calling the whole Kuonji household into suspicion as murderers? I have to object!" I exclaimed, my emotions spinning out of control.

It occurred to me that my anger was the same flavor of outrage I had felt toward Enokizu the day before. But what had upset me then was his preposterous attitude. This was different; no one was being unreasonable here. So what was I so mad about? Was it that I didn't want to see things play out in a way that would harm the family—especially Ryoko? If that were true, then I—

"What's he all mad about?" Kiba demanded, his voice high with exasperation.

"He's either got some personal grudge here or he's having a spell of righteous indignation—it's hard to tell which," Kyogokudo observed with his customary composure.

"Oh, it's indignation to be sure. What you're talking about is unfounded discrimination. For a state authority to call suspicion on a citizen on such a flimsy basis is something I'd expect from the government centuries ago, not now! This suspicion of yours flies in the face of basic human rights. It's a dis-

grace to democracy!"

No. That's not why I'm so mad.

So why was this man-of-the-people argument—at complete odds with what I felt—coming from my mouth?

"Well?" I asked the unshakable Kyogokudo. He was, of course, not flustered in the least.

"As you say, this is an evil, deep-rooted custom that originates in the same place as racial and regional discrimination. It is something that should not be, and we should make every effort to do away with it. However, knowing how things should be doesn't preclude us from acknowledging the current state of affairs. You can't help to improve a situation until you understand it, and we dare not twist historical and cultural realities just to make things more palatable in the short term. We can update our understanding of fox possession as being a trance-like state, and of the symptoms of possession in general as belonging to a kind of neurosis; and yet both of these explanations leave the problem of discrimination entirely unresolved. Just look at how things are now: the old customs remain firmly entrenched, with all their associated prejudices intact. And this is the arena in which the Kuonji case is playing out, whether we like it or not." Kyogokudo's voice was calm and even throughout.

Of course it is. I know that!

Kiba snapped his fan shut, crossed his arms and sighed. Then he looked at me and said, "This conversation is far too complicated for its own good. Tell me, Sekiguchi, just what kind of solution do you see for the case, anyway? Yeah, the Kuonjis have been subjected to baseless pressure and discrimination for generations, and yeah, it's a real tragedy. People have been looking at them through blood-colored glasses for years. But that and what you're talking about are two different things. Sure, we can take pity on them, but just because everyone wrongly suspects them of one thing doesn't make them innocent of all wrongdoing. Let's say that they aren't all lying, and that the room the adopted son went into truly was sealed. Under those conditions, is there a realistic explanation for the mystery? People can't just up and disappear—"

"Actually, if you use the right chemicals, it's pretty easy."

"None of that from you now, Kyogoku. What I'm saying, Sekiguchi, is that if we accept all these assumptions then the only explanation is that either the adopted son turned to smoke and blew away, or he put on some *tengu's* cloak of invisibility and disappeared entirely."

"Oh, good one! Bravo, boss," Kyogokudo chortled. "I like the trickster spirit's cloak idea. Or maybe Fujimaki went the way of Wells' invisible man. That would work too. Maybe he's *still inside the clinic*. He could be wandering the corridors, feeding the rats and removing incriminating pages from his own diaries. Yes, I like it!" He looked as if this were the most fun he'd had in some time.

But Kiba's face was dead serious, and his tiny eyes threatened me in silence.

"Okay," I said, "I admit that my investigation such as it was hit a dead end. But Kiba, your conjectures lack any kind of decisive proof. You don't have enough information to reach those conclusions. That's what I want—what I meant to say."

"Well, you've toned down your point quite a bit, Sekiguchi. I may be biased, but it seems to me you're acting a little strange. Is there something going on here we don't know about?" Kyogokudo asked softly.

I didn't know. How could there be anything?

Nothing was going on. Nothing had happened.

—*Want to play?*

I remembered I had...

I had—

"Right," Kiba said in a loud voice, interrupting my thoughts. "If you're so invested in this anyway, how about we investigate the case together? It's not like I can pretend nothing happened after all I've seen and heard."

This was an unexpected development.

"Are you even allowed to look into something in your official capacity if no charges have been brought?" Kyogokudo asked.

Kiba straightened his collar. "I'm a police detective, not a private eye. I don't need a client to invite me in if there is sufficient suspicion of criminality somewhere; part of my public duty is to prevent further crimes. Things weren't very clear in the case of the missing infants, but now we're talking about a disappearance that the family has acknowledged. Just knowing that a request was made to a private eye is cause enough for me to take on the case." After saying this, Kiba laughed out loud.

I was pretty sure the client, Ryoko, would not take kindly to police involvement. But if I were to drop the matter now, Kiba would surely take it up on his own. It would be better if I joined him, after all. All I'd have to do is solve the case before he could. I didn't want these investigations and the wild accusations they brought in their wake to cause Ryoko Kuonji anymore stress.

Kiba suggested that our first move should be going to talk to the Kuonjis' former employees, the couple Tokizo and Tomiko. I had been planning on visiting them later that day anyhow, so of course I agreed.

Kiba already knew where Tokizo and his wife were living. The couple's only child had died during the war, and now they were staying with a distant relative who ran a dried-goods shop in Itabashi. We left Kyogokudo behind us, its eponymous proprietor already engrossed in his stack of borrowed journals.

It was my first time visiting Itabashi—originally a stop on the old Nakasendo Road that led down through the mountains toward Nagoya in the south. Though there was something like a proper business district along the highway, one step off the beaten path and we found ourselves in a labyrinth of narrow streets divided by high walls, some made of wood and some of clay. Reconstruction after the war had divided the central parts of Tokyo along neat, straight lines, but here, the streets still retained their organic curves, grown to accommodate the natural features of the landscape. I felt both the comfort of being ensconced in a protective womb, and the anxiety that comes from not being able to see further ahead of me than the next corner.

"I live over in Koishikawa, so this place is sort of like my backyard," Kiba said, narrowing his eyes and getting his bearings. "It's funny the way they name places," he added. "They call this place 'Itabashi' because of an *itabashi*—a wooden-plank bridge—that used to cross the Shakuji River here—nothing more significant than that."

The shop that was our destination was named Umeya, and a large sign on its façade read "dried goods," the sooty streaks across it marking it as a survivor of the firebombing.

The open storefront was filled up with trays of cured fish, dried gourd shavings, and all manner of similar things, from which yellowed placards dangled, announcing their prices. Everything—the building, the signs, even the produce—had faded to the same tone, an ashen yellowish hue. The air was filled with the choking stench unique to smoked goods. I kept my mouth shut tightly, but Kiba didn't seem to mind. He looked over the trays as if selecting what he might buy and said he thought the lot of it would go well with a cold beer.

I didn't know what to say.

"Welcome, welcome." The proprietor, a short, plump woman in her forties, greeted us dutifully and cheerily enough without even looking in our direction. She was wearing a sweater—also faded—and a stained apron. I surmised that she was the distant relative of the couple we were here to see.

Kiba strolled over to her with practiced casualness, said something in a hushed voice, and pulled the police notebook from his breast pocket. This was his identification as an officer of the law. The woman's small eyes opened wider than I would have thought possible, and she hastily dashed back inside the building. Moments later, she reemerged, and beckoned us to come in.

The room adjacent to the storefront was a simple parlor with a low table and tea cabinet and three sitting cushions with the stuffing bulging out. Before we could even sit down, the woman popped out of sight behind a sliding door, then reappeared again; and from behind her, pushing her out of the way, came an old man. It was Tokizo Sawada.

Tokizo was thin as a crane, and his sunken eyes peered out from beneath a shock of pure white, unkempt hair. "What do the police want with me? I've got nothing to say to you. Get out." His voice was hoarse, but firm and quietly threatening at the same time.

His eyes were striking. In them I saw burning a fiery will cultivated over many long years. Their glare made it powerfully clear that this was not the sort of old man with whom one should expect to have a reasonable conversation.

"Thanks for your welcome, Mr. Sawada. But I'd think you'd be past being difficult for the sake of your former employers by now. We're just here to chat, in any case."

"I've no words for you rumor-spreading filth. Get out."

"Now, now. We're not some vagabonds off the street. I might not look like it, but I am on the national payroll—a public servant, you know."

Tokizo gave Kiba a stern look, and his dark eyes darkened even further.

"And what has this country ever done for me? It took away my son, that's what it did."

"Mr. Sawada—"

Kiba signaled to me with his eyes, so I cleared my throat and spoke quickly. "Actually, we're not here about the missing infants. We're looking for the young doctor, Mr. Kuonji, who went missing a year or so ago. Might we have a few words with you?"

"If that's what you're here for...if that's what you want to know about, I've nothing to say to you. I don't know anything." The old man had hesitated for a moment, but by the time he finished, he looked more determined than ever not to tell us a thing.

"Really, Mr. Sawada—we're doing this on behalf of your benefactors, the Kuonjis. Can't you be a little more cooperative?"

"What, the director...or his wife...asked for you to find him?" He had clearly started to waver. I silently thanked Kiba. Apparently, calling the man on his loyalty had been an effective ploy.

"Actually, the request came from Miss Ryoko Kuonji," I explained. "I'm not a police officer, I'm a private citizen—Ryoko asked me to locate the doctor. Of course, if at all possible, I'll do what I can to find him without involving the police. If you could just tell us—"

"Ryoko?!" the old man shouted, cutting me off. For a moment, I saw emotions flare in those dark eyes, more fear than surprise. "Then I certainly have nothing to say to you. Now go, leave! Don't come back! Get out!" The old man stood and shuffled backward, still staring at me; then, groping behind himself, he opened the sliding door, and promptly disappeared into the next room. The shop's proprietor was standing on the other side of the doorway, a tray of tea things in her hands, her mouth hanging open.

Neither I nor Kiba said a word. It was the woman who first broke the uneasy silence.

"I'm very sorry. Mr. Sawada is old and, well, ornery. Please forgive him. You—you're not going to arrest him, are you?"

The woman—Tsuneko Umemoto, we learned her name was—bowed her head down as far as it would go, apologizing. Kiba assured her that we weren't here to arrest anyone, but it still took him a while to get the lady to stop bowing and sit down to talk.

According to Tsuneko, Tokizo and Tomiko Sawada had come to live with her in the spring of the previous year, around the beginning of March. That would have been two months after Fujimaki's disappearance. Tsuneko's late husband had been the cousin of Tomiko's mother, so they weren't particularly closely related, and at first, she hadn't known what to do with them.

"I was living by myself then, too, and I took pity on them. I'd met her before, but I'd never met her husband, you see, and I wasn't sure I could take them in at first."

"Why did you, eventually?"

"Well, Mrs. Sawada was in an awful fright, said they could never go back to the hospital. She never told me what happened, though. And, er..."

"Yes?"

"Well, they brought living expenses with them, quite a large sum of money, actually..."

"How large? Do you remember the amount?"

"Well..." Tsuneko glanced over her shoulder, as if worried that the old man might be eavesdropping on her; then she turned back to us, a strangely meek expression on her face, and beckoned us closer with a wave of her hand. "One million yen," she whispered. "One million! More money than a poor person like me had ever dreamed of seeing in my life, I'll tell you what." As soon as she had said it, she put a hand to her mouth, looking startled. "Oh dear, is that a crime? I mean, I took the money. It's okay if I give it back, right? Oh dear, dear me."

"Relax, ma'am, you've done nothing wrong. What did you do with all that money, if I might ask?" Kiba's voice was soft, like he was calming a child. The woman didn't need any encouragement to tell us, however. Apparently, she suffered from a compulsive tendency to obey authority without question.

"Well, I used a bit fixing up the shop here. The rest I left with Mr. Sawada."

Kiba turned to me. "Sounds like hush money to me."

"You know," I said, "I bet the money came from the pool of cash Fujimaki brought with him when he was adopted." I hated to admit it, but it seemed pretty obvious from the facts. I wondered if there was anyone who would give a departing employee such a generous amount of cash without expecting something in return.

Kiba nodded. "So they doled out the money and everybody left without saying a thing. With those sorts of sums, it's no wonder they weren't repairing the hospital. I bet the Sawadas weren't the only ones they paid off."

I had to agree that the Kuonji Clinic in its current state certainly didn't look like five million had been spent to repair it. In fact, what little work had been done was so slipshod, I suspected that no money had been spent on it at all.

But if, as Kiba said, the money paid to Tokizo and his wife was hush money, then clearly the Kuonjis had something to hide. Kiba nodded again, then looked up at the woman. "Where's Mrs. Sawada, by the way?"

"Well she went out a little while ago, said she'd be right back. You saw how Mr. Sawada is, but his wife is quite sociable. I'm really sorry about his behavior..." Tsuneko launched into a new round of apologies.

We decided to wait for Tomiko Sawada to return, meanwhile talking a little more with the timid dried-goods store proprietor. All the while, a current of trepidation ran under our conversation—each of us knowing that an old man who didn't take kindly to our being there was lurking in the next room. There was no telling when he might come bursting out in a wild rage. Tsuneko, however, had surrendered completely, just because we were the police.

According to her, Tokizo's father had worked for the Kuonjis before him. Though Tokizo looked pretty ancient, in fact he had only just reached sixty. Still, if his family had been working for the Kuonjis for two generations, that meant they had been with them in the early teens, if not the last century—maybe even from the time when the Kuonjis were still in Sanuki.

I asked about this, and Tsuneko's eyes brightened. "Well, as it so happens," she began, sounding just like a farm lady trading gossip around the village well, "I heard a story about my grandfather's father's mother once. For some reason, she left her life in the town where she lived, and became a pilgrim—said she was going to visit the eighty-eight shrines in Shikoku. Well, it turns out she didn't make it to all of them. She collapsed on the road, and the person who came along and helped her was a Kuonji. Apparently, she was with child—that would be my grandfather's father—and the Kuonjis helped her give birth, and raised her son for her, and they have taken care of our family ever since."

"I see, a genuine debt," Kiba said. "By the way, when my friend here mentioned Ryoko just now, Mr. Sawada went pretty pale. Have you heard anything that might explain that?"

"Oh, they never told me anything that went on down at the hospital... Though I do remember one time a while back when Mrs. Sawada came visiting—this was before they moved in."

"Did she come here often?"

"Oh no, I think she just got lonely every now and then. She would only come once every two or three years, just drop in and say hi. Yes, this was when my man was still doing fine, so it was before the war, or maybe just after the war started. This building here got hit bad in the air raids, you know."

"What did she tell you?"

"Well, she said the daughter of the family at the hospital had gotten pregnant, and no one knew who the father was, and everyone was wondering whether she should have the baby or not."

"Fujimaki's kid!"

So Kyogokudo's conjectures had hit the mark. If Kyoko Kuonji and Makio Fujino had had a child together, it would have been just around that time.

"So, did she have the kid?"

"Well, Tomiko said there didn't seem to be much choice about it, but I wonder. From what I remember, the girl was still only fifteen or so at the time, and my man said that would be pretty tough on the parents. But then the war got worse, and my man, he died in the fires. The next time Mrs. Sawada came calling, I'd say it was the year after the war ended. Around then, I had all I could do just getting by, and I'd completely forgotten about the girl one way or the other. So I guess I don't know what happened after that."

Tsuneko glanced past us out into the store. Abruptly, she stopped talking. We turned our heads to see what had caught her attention. A small old woman was standing at the storefront: Tomiko Sawada.

"Tsuneko, what are you talking about in there? You know what my husband would say if he heard you," the woman was standing as tall as she could, her tiny frame trying to fill the doorway. She clutched a cloth bundle in one hand.

"Ah, Mrs. Sawada. How nice to see you again."

"You're that detective. What do you want? I told you everything I know already. Tsuneko, where's my husband?" Tomiko demanded. Warily she shuffled into the parlor.

Tsuneko told her why we were there, and the old woman turned her gaze away from us, snorting. "Then I've nothing to say to them. They'd better leave if they know what's good for them. You shouldn't be talking to them neither, Tsuneko," she added, as if her opinion on the matter weren't already perfectly clear.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Sawada. My own role here aside, this fellow with me is here at the request of the Kuonjis' daughter. Don't you think you owe it to them to at least hear him out?"

His words seemed to have an effect on the old woman, albeit a slight one. She peered at me. "Their daughter? You mean Kyoko?"

"Her sister, actually."

"Ryoko? Well, what do you want to know?"

I hadn't expected her to agree to any questioning, so for a moment I faltered. Finally I asked her about the day of the disappearance, but what she told me was no different from any of the testimonies I'd heard before. When I asked her if she had looked inside the archive room after the door was broken down, she became suddenly aggravated. "I didn't see a thing," she insisted, far more firmly than I thought necessary. "Not a thing. I don't know nothing about it. Nothing!"

Tsuneko butted in. "But Mrs. Sawada, what was it that you were saying was so frightful, when you first came to stay here?"

The old woman glared at Tsuneko. "There's no need for you to go saying anything. And I've forgot about all that anyhow. My husband's going to be mighty furious with the both of us. In fact, I think I've said more than enough."

Tomiko's eyes went as dark as her husband's, and she withdrew toward the back room where he'd gone.

"Wait—one more thing," I called after her as she reached the doorway. There was something else I had to ask about, even though I had no idea whether it had anything to do with the case at all.

"Do you know anything about a child with a frog's face?"

Tomiko sat down unsteadily right where she'd been standing, her hand still on the sliding door. "Why...how do you know about that?"

"Do you know something, Mrs. Sawada? It's very important that you tell me if you do."

It was as if whatever strings had been wound so tightly around the old woman had suddenly snapped. She slumped forward, looking up at us as if she might burst into tears at any moment—though I couldn't guess whether those would be tears of sadness, or of fright, so layered were the lines of age on the woman's face.

She began to speak in a dry, whispery voice. "I heard this once from my husband. The Kuonjis made their fortunes back in the countryside, in Sanuki, as *tayū*. Now, I know that's what they call them courtesans up in Yoshiwara, too, but that's not what I'm talking about. These are charm-makers, spell weavers who pray to whatever god their family serves. Some pray to dog-spirits, others to Hindu gods—there're all kinds. It's said the Kuonjis' god was a kind of child."

The oshobo.

"They say that once upon a time, a pilgrim set up camp just outside their village. Apparently this fellow had some scrolls full of mystical knowledge, and he was using their supernatural powers to cure people of disease, and getting quite popular out of it. Now the Kuonji *tayū* didn't take kindly to this butt-

ing in on the family business, so they sent their child-god to curse and kill this pilgrim. But apparently his powers were too strong for them, and their curses came back to them as counter-curses, and brought ruin on the village."

"Counter-curses? What're those?" Kiba asked.

"I've heard of something of the sort from Kyogokudo, actually," I said. "It's something *onmyōji*—*onmyōdo* practitioners—do, to move a curse from one person to another."

The old woman nodded quietly. "So, the Kuonji *tayū* came up with a plan. They let it out that they wanted to apologize and invited the pilgrim to come to their house; and once he was there they killed him with a concoction of *bikki* poison. *Bikki*—that's what they call a toad down there."

"A toad?"

"Yes. The Kuonji family was good at more than spells. They made medicines too, all different kinds. The pilgrim died a painful death, but as he died, he cursed the Kuonji house. If they poisoned him with toad venom, well, he'd do the same right back to them and all their descendants. And they say the pilgrim's body never withered, even after he died."

"Sounds like a folk tale."

"It is a folk tale. But believe me, I was scared plenty when I heard it from my husband. The Kuonjis stole that scroll of secrets from the pilgrim, and got rich off of it. But the pilgrim's curse was strong, and every male child born to the family after that was born with the face of a frog. They don't live long, neither. That's why the Kuonji family line is all women, and no one in their village would send their boys to marry them."

"But that's—Mrs. Sawada, when did all this supposedly happen?"

"Well, it would be before the Kuonjis started serving that lord, so quite a while back, I guess. But it's all true. I know it, 'cause I saw the truth of it myself, thirty years back..."

"Thirty years back?"

"Tomiko! You stop that right now!"

At some point, the sliding door had opened again, and old Tokizo stood there glaring at us. "Detective, you and your friend can leave now. We don't know nothing, and old folk tales like that one you heard just now is the best you'll get from us. Please, just *go away*."

The man's tone was harsh enough to discourage any further questions, and neither Tomiko nor Tsuneko would say another word to us after that.

Having little alternative, Kiba and I left Umeya Traders. The old couple had gone into the back room and wouldn't come out, and all Tsuneko did was bow her head and apologize. There was nothing more we could hope to get out of any of them.

It left a bad taste in my mouth.

A few steps down the street, Kiba stopped and looked at me, then spoke with an ironic twist in his voice. "Well, my good man of letters and part-time private eye, this kamikaze detective sure thinks that wasn't a waste of our time. You saw how the Sawadas reacted? We may not have gotten much in the way of real testimony, but if anything it makes me more suspicious than ever about the goings-on at the Kuonji Clinic. What does our resident Kuonji sympathizer Captain Sekiguchi have to say about all this?"

I couldn't answer. Tomiko Sawada's folktale filled the back of my head, and until I had forgotten it, I knew I couldn't relax.

Thirty years ago—had she seen a baby with the face of a frog thirty years ago?

Thirty years would have been before Ryoko and Kyoko were even born. What had happened so long ago? Was that the memory that Enokizu had seen in his vision?

"Well, looks like you're thinking things through. Anyhow, Sekiguchi, since we've come this far, there's someplace else I'd like to go. I hope you'll join me?"

"If it's got something to do with the case, I'll come. Where are you taking us?"

"To the house of the field officer—the first one to raise charges about a missing infant. It's within walking distance of here," Kiba said, heading off down the street.

The road to the officer's house was as tortuous as any of the others in the district, so when we found ourselves at the top of a hill, I wasn't quite sure how we had gotten there.

Kiba stopped at the highest point. "Here where we are is just outside Kamijuku, see. A lot of *enoki* trees and *tsuki* trees used to grow here, so the old folks called this hill *en-no-tsuki*—said it was bad luck. Of course it has a real name, something about rocks, but they said no, it was the *en-no-tsuki*, the 'end of ties.' Like the hill ever did anything to them. Of course, even that's better than the *haka-no-machi memaizaka* on the way up to Kyogokudo."

"Huh? 'Vertigo-slope of grave-town'? That's its real name?"

"What, you didn't know? There are those cemeteries on either side of it all the way up, right? That's where 'grave-town' comes from. And for some reason, people talk about getting dizzy about halfway down when they're walking."

So there were *graves* on the other side of those walls.

"Yep, apparently there was a big temple there a long time ago, but that got abandoned, and now the monks from some sect are taking care of the graveyards. The hill used to have a serious name like the 'going-back slope' or something, after some place in Kyoto, but no one calls it that these days."

"In Kyoto? You mean the Ichijo Modoribashi bridge?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

The Modoribashi, or "Going-Back Bridge," which spanned Kyoto's Hori River, was the famous bridge from a story in which the hero Watanabe-no-Tsuna cuts the arm off an ogress. It was also the place where the *onmyoji* Abe-no-Seimei had kept his twelve *shikioni*—demons of the sort used by practitioners of his art. I recalled that near the bridge there were ruins identified as the old Seimei residence, and a shrine dedicated to him.

"Wait a second!" I said suddenly. "Of course! The shrine where Kyo-gokudo works as a priest is an offshoot of the Seimei Shrine!" I was sure of it. That lantern he had handed me on that memorable night was from the shrine; and the symbol on the lantern, the five stars to ward off demons, came from the five stars in the Abe-no-Seimei family crest. I didn't know why I hadn't put the two together before.

Kiba looked at me suspiciously. "Wow, I'd have thought you'd know more about the man. Haven't you been friends for quite a while? Even I know his shrine's called the Musashi Seimei Shrine. Hey, we're almost there."

At the bottom of the ill-omened slope sat what was, for lack of a better word, a slum. When Itabashi had ceased to function as a stop for travelers on the old highway, many of the toughs, street performers, and itinerant ostlers that had often passed through the place had taken up permanent residence. That had been the start of it. Now there were merchants, tradesmen, garbage collectors, and beggars living there too.

Roughly constructed row houses jostled for space with the flophouses, and the murky ditches and damp air invited depression. And yet, despite their environment, the people here seemed unaccountably cheerful. As we walked we could hear the sound of children playing and women chattering as they went about their daily chores.

"Me, I like these people," Kiba said, sticking out his chest. "So what if they're poor and don't bathe that much? Hell, *that's* what I like about them. They're better than the people who sit on the poor, pretending nothing's wrong, if you ask me. Anyway, pretty much the whole country was like this just a little while ago."

In truth, most of Japan had been a slum immediately following the war—and all of it filled with a groundless optimism and zest for life—just like the place where we now found ourselves.

I hadn't been able to understand it when I'd first returned from the front. We had lost the war, so why wasn't anybody sad? Everything we'd believed in had been wrong. When we attacked they told us we were glorious balls of fire, when we died they said it was the breaking of jewels, and all the while the government preached the justness of our struggle; and yet when it was over the leaders' attitude changed overnight, and they became staunch advocates of democracy, while Japan's impoverished people seemed more lively than ever.

To confess the truth, I had been thoroughly against the war from the start. But as I was more asocial than antisocial, no one had ever noticed my reluctance, and in the end I had found myself fighting anyway. I was, in other words, a coward. I was ashamed of this fact. But it seemed to me that the greater part of my countrymen had sincerely believed in the justice of our cause. Of course nobody really wanted to fight, let alone die, but I wondered how many in the midst of all the patriotic fervor had suspected that our nation was just plain wrong.

Regardless, with their incomprehensible energy as a foundation, the people of Japan had made their peace; and our quality of life kept going up and up, like shoots of new bamboo. Ironically, as our daily lives regained their richness, that tremendous life force that had gotten us there had begun to fade away.

But not here. Here it remained—though if this energy had truly been the driving force behind the rest of the country's development, I could only assume that this place, too, would eventually become as gentrified as any other neighborhood in the capital.

Probably.

Kiba was still talking. "The man we're going to see is named Goichi Harasawa. He was a field officer; thirty-five years old this year. His wife's named Koharu—about thirty, I'd say, and I guess you could call her attractive. He met her through an arranged marriage, and a half-year later, got sent off to war. They sent him to Burma, the battle of Imphal. He took his share of wounds along with all the other casualties. He got it in the leg, and got one of his fingers blown clean off. So he returns home, clinging to life, and finds his whole family dead, and his house destroyed." The skin wrinkled between Kiba's eyebrows; it was a common expression for the detective. "But, his wife was still alive, so they had a tearful reunion. I guess he counted his blessings then; and though he couldn't move around so well, he forced himself to work as hard as he could. When money finally started coming in, the wife got pregnant. They were happy, till the child went missing."

The way Kiba summarized the man's life, seeming to discern the most important events instinctively, made it sound as if he were recounting his own experiences.

I couldn't think of anything fitting to say, and so I merely nodded in silence.

We arrived at our destination without me saying another word. It was a row house, with a sign on it that read "Hanyu," though I wasn't sure whether that was the name of the district, or of some person.

"I'm coming in," Kiba said in a loud voice, pushing open the door.

There was a man inside the front room. He whirled around, his blood-shot eyes full of fright. A bundle of paper fell from his hand onto the floor. It

was money. The man—Goichi Harasawa, evidently—began hastily scooping it up.

"Hey," Kiba said, "that's pretty impressive."

Harasawa didn't look up until he had stuffed the last bill into his pocket.

The air in the room was sour, maybe from mold, or maybe the tatami had begun to rot. A futon was laid out permanently along one wall, next to a wooden box serving in place of a desk. There were several magazines in a stack atop the box, and the topmost looked familiar for some reason.

That's—

True Tales of the Bizarre!

"Oh great, so you were the one who went to the papers? Why now? What's the use? It was you who dropped the charges!" Kiba strode into the room, his voice a threatening growl.

Harasawa tensed like a small animal sensing danger, and glared at us. "What of it? If you want to arrest me, then fine, go ahead and arrest me. I'm not scared of you! What's wrong if I tell someone what I know and get a little money for it?"

The man's thick whiskers and thinning hair made his age impossible to determine. His eyes had gone beyond fear and looked outright wild.

"What, are you still trying to get back at the Kuonjis?"

"Of course I am! All that time trying to have a kid, just to have it taken away—do you expect me to just bow my head and forget about it?"

"Then why did you drop the charges? Why go to the papers? You found out something, didn't you?"

"What of it? I don't have to talk to you. The police did nothing for me, nothing!" Harasawa clutched at the magazines atop the box but couldn't grab them all, and a couple slid onto the tatami. There were several in all. Each one was different, but all were the same kind of muckraking tabloid.

Every one of the magazines featured the Kuonjis' disgrace in bold letters on its cover. I felt the back of my neck get hot, but for some reason, I wasn't angry. I felt confused.

"Just calm down, Harasawa. See, I've reopened the case."

"What?"

"I'm reinvestigating the case of the missing children."

Harasawa stopped. "What did you just say?" he asked quietly.

"I told you, I'm investigating the Kuonjis. And this fellow here—well, you might say he's another victim."

That's how I was introduced. I merely bowed my head, neither confirming nor denying it. Harasawa looked at me with pity in his eyes. He thought I'd lost a child, too.

Kiba motioned me inside, then shut the door behind us. Harasawa stood

there for a while saying nothing. The dark clouds still hung in his eyes, though the bestial violence of a moment before was quickly receding, leaving a somber weariness in its place.

I asked him why he first thought his child had been taken.

His reply was blunt, but once he got started, he seemed willing enough to talk. "My wife was never the healthiest of women, and living like this had made her condition even worse. We took on boarders, but with a place like this, you can't make any real money that way, so I started to work nights. My father and brothers all died in the war, and I wanted a child like nothing else. My wife was worried, though, so we saved up money for the hospital first, and I paid that clinic—I didn't know what kind of place it was—upfront when the time came, and then went back to work so we'd be able to move when the baby arrived. I couldn't be picky about what I did, so I signed up with a sweatshop and did what I could. That's why when the child came, they couldn't even reach me. I just kept on working."

"So you weren't there when she gave birth?"

"No. I figured she'd be okay as long as she was in the hospital—we'd worked so hard to get her in there. When I heard the news, I practically flew over there."

"I see."

"In all three cases, the father wasn't present for the birth," Kiba put in. "Only the mothers were in the hospital."

Harasawa nodded. "When I got there the next day, something seemed wrong. No one would look at me and everything was quiet, and when the doctor came out, he said it was a stillbirth. I was surprised and sad, to be sure, more so because I'd heard she had been doing just fine. I wanted to comfort my wife, but they said that she wasn't well after the birth and I couldn't visit her. It was three days before I got to see her again. She was out of it, she was very strange. And a week later when they finally let her go, she said something very odd. She said that it wasn't a stillbirth—that she had heard the baby cry. She even remembered someone telling her 'congratulations, it's a boy.' That didn't sit well with me, so I went to ask the doctor."

"And what did he say?"

"He said she had been in shock, and suffering delusions, hearing imaginary things. I'll admit my wife did seem strange, not quite right in the head, even. But it still bothered me, so I told them to give me the body, that I wanted to do a funeral, and they gave me that."

Harasawa indicated a corner of the room with his jaw, where a small white urn sat. Perversely, I couldn't help but remember Kyogokudo's dried sweets.

"There were some chunks of something in there—you couldn't tell if they were bone or rocks. They gave me that and tried to tell me it was my son! Well,

I sure wasn't buying it. What gave them the right to cremate him, anyway? And while the urn was nice enough, I sure didn't appreciate opening it to find garbage inside."

As he spoke, Harasawa began to cry. A feeling of helplessness came over me.

"Then why did you drop your charges?"

"It was my wife. She said she didn't want to deal with it anymore. She wanted us to forget, to start over." Harasawa was shaking. "But she...she sold our boy for money, that's what she did!"

"She did what?"

"I went to the police and dropped the charges like she asked, and the next day she up and vanished. I guess when she said she wanted to start over, she meant by herself. I found out later that while I had been gone somebody from the Kuonjis had dropped by several times. You can see for yourself the walls in here are none too sturdy; you can practically hear people whispering in the next room. Well, I found out they gave her money. She sold our boy for a million yen!"

Harasawa's bearded face twisted as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"There's that figure again. I suppose a million is enough to move someone to—"

"No, it's not! You can't trade your child for money! That was my—that was my boy!"

I lowered my face, unable to meet his eyes.

If the Kuonji Clinic had offered each of the couples the same amount to drop their charges, that would mean three million yen spent in total. And another million to keep Tokizo and his wife quiet made four. They'd have run out of money awfully quick doing business that way. They could have gone through everything Fujimaki had brought them in the space of a day.

"So that's why everybody dropped their charges at the same time. The Kuonjis were spreading all that money around—and everyone took it and ran. Including your wife," Kiba said quietly. "You know what I say? Forget her, Harasawa. I'll avenge your boy. Stop talking to these magazines and tell me everything you know. I can't offer you money, but I promise you I'll put the information to good use. The people who did this to you and your son are going to get their due."

Harasawa stared at the urn for a while; then, wiping at his tears with his sleeve, he turned to Kiba. "When my wife disappeared, and I heard the police had dropped the case, I couldn't work for a while. I just slept all day. I thought it would've been better if I had died back in Burma. I thought it'd be better to just die."

The rough tone in Harasawa's voice was gone, replaced by a kind of defeated politeness. "But then, my anger got the best of me, and I wanted re-

venge on that doctor. Once I got to thinking about it I couldn't stop. I took what money I'd saved to fund my efforts, and I started going around, asking questions, pretending I was some kind of private eye. Not that I thought anything would ever come of it. It was just to put my mind at ease. But then..."

"Then what?"

"That's when I ran into that nurse at a bar in Ikebukuro."

"A nurse."

"The woman who was there when my wife gave birth—name of Sumie."

"Sumie? Sumie Toda?"

"That's her. She'd gone home to Toyama for a while, but then she came back."

Kiba's expression hardened. She must have been one of the missing nurses.

"Anyway I decided to befriend her. Sumie was a hard one to figure, always a little off kilter with her drinking. But we met a few times and got close, and she started telling me things. According to her, my son—"

"It wasn't a stillbirth?"

Harasawa nodded limply. "Sumie was the one who gave him his first bath. But the next day, he went missing. The way she tells it, that Kuonji girl stole him. And then she...she killed him. She killed my boy."

It was damning testimony. I felt my pulse quicken. The front page of *True Tales of the Bizarre* ran through my mind.

Kishimojin, devourer of babies!

Stealing the children of others to drain their warm blood and wring their fat...

Stealing the children of others...

Harasawa stared off into space, his face a pale mask. "He had a, a mole right in the middle of his forehead. A healthy little boy. That's what Sumie told me. You, detective—hearing that, would you believe my boy was stillborn?"

"Well, the four nurses who worked at the clinic during the time those babies were born all left Tokyo and disappeared. I was going to go look for them when you and the other parents dropped charges and the investigation was closed."

"Sumie tells me that all the nurses got money and were sent home. She herself got about two hundred thousand, and they even helped her look for a new job. But she said she didn't like it out in the countryside, so she came back here."

If each of the nurses had received two hundred thousand, that made eight hundred thousand in all. They were down to the bottom of Fujimaki's money.

"But, it turned out she had another reason for coming back to Tokyo," Harasawa said, looking down at the floor, a wry smile on his lips.

"What was that?"

"Drugs. She was an addict. It was like she was always dreaming."

"Drugs? You mean Philopon?"

"I thought so too at first, but it was different. You two must have been in the Army; I'm sure you know. Philopon makes you all alert, right? She was different."

"So she was an addict. I wonder where she got her supply?"

"Heh. From the Kuonjis, of course. They used it to get leverage on her. She didn't come back for money. She came for the drugs."

"The *datura*!" I said without thinking, and immediately regretted it. This could only be bad news for the Kuonjis' case.

"Is that those flowers they had growing in their garden? The morning glories?" Unfortunately, Kiba remembered.

"Yeah," I said. "See, Philopon or any other kind of amphetamine is a stimulant. Your nervous system gets a buzz, and you feel high. But *datura* is the opposite, a depressant. Harasawa, do you see any resemblance between how Miss Toda acted when she was high, and how your wife was after she gave birth?"

What am I thinking, asking this?

"Now you mention it, I do. They both had that same faraway look. So you think the hospital drugged my wife?"

"The alkaloids in the *datura* can be used to induce sleep, or as a painkiller, but depending on the amount and method of delivery they can also induce delirium, a state where it becomes impossible to tell between reality and your own delusions, and the mind becomes confused. So they could—"

"They could try to make her forget about the birth," Kiba concluded.

I trembled at the accusation in my own words.

"Hey, Harasawa. D'you know where this Sumie Toda's living now?" Clearly Kiba had made up his mind. Toda would be a critical witness if we could talk to her.

"Nowhere. She's dead," Harasawa said quietly.

"Dead?"

"I visited her place this spring and it was empty. I talked to the woman who was her landlord, and she said she'd gone down to collect on late rent and found Sumie lying there cold as stone. She contacted her hometown but there was no one to come get her, so she had her buried anonymously out in Nakano. There's a big graveyard out there."

Kiba and I exchanged glances. The big graveyard in Nakano was the grave-town on the hill leading up to Kyogokudo. We had walked past our key witness, lying in eternal sleep, on our way to Itabashi that morning.

And I had walked by her many other times as well.

"What was the cause of death? Suicide? Murder?"

"Not sure. The landlord was all frightened and called a doctor, of course,

and he said there was something weird about it so they called the police. But in the end, they decided she died of wasting, some kind of malnutrition. Guess she didn't eat right."

"So the death was natural?"

I wondered.

If she really had been taking *datura* alkaloids in some form, then all who ever was supplying her had to do was give her an extra spoonful.

Datura made a very effective poison.

I kept my thoughts to myself, however, not caring to see where that line of reasoning might lead.

"Of course, maybe she was given an overdose of those—what were they, morning glories? You could probably get a lethal amount of that, couldn't you? Go over the limit and it might just kill her."

It was like Kiba had read my mind. I was speechless.

Kiba crossed his arms and stared at Harasawa. The field officer was gazing at nothing, his shoulders gone limp.

"Hey, Harasawa. If I asked you to, you could tell a court what you told me just now, right?"

Harasawa looked up at Kiba, his head swiveling convulsively on his thin neck.

"If you can tell your story to some magazine you've never heard of, you can tell a court. Don't say that you can't. This is for your son's sake. What do you say?" Kiba fixed him with a piercing glare, narrowing his narrow eyes even further, as was his habit whenever he got excited. "If you're willing to do that, then I could get a warrant and be down at the Kuonji place tomorrow morning. Hit them hard enough and the dust will show. We'll pull those skeletons out of the closet, all right, and we'll get you your justice."

"But Detective Kiba, you—"

"Don't worry. Sumie Toda didn't die in vain. If I mention her to the judge I'll get my warrant. They've been getting serious about bringing in drug offenders lately."

Harasawa's gaze darted back and forth between me and Kiba. When he spoke, his voice was trembling. "Detective Kiba, by 'justice'—what do you mean by 'justice'? You going to give them the death sentence? That doctor, and his crazy daughter? Can you put them to death?" Tears formed in his shadowed eyes, and his face shuddered with grief.

The idea that tears are in any way beautiful is just that: an idea. In reality, crying people look miserable and small. There was no beauty in this moment, only sadness. The man sitting before us was crying for his lost child, just as the woman upon whom he wanted revenge, Kyoko Kuonji, had cried for her missing husband.

Maybe Kiba could save this man from his sadness. But who would save

Kyoko from hers?

"They might not get the death sentence," Kiba was saying, "but they'll pay for what they've done, I can promise you that. A mole can dig down under the earth as far as he likes, and he'll still get dragged out to meet his maker at the end and be judged."

"What do your judges understand about people like me? The police are never on our side. Neither are the gods, or Buddhas for that matter." The violence rose again in Harasawa's eyes.

"Look at me, Harasawa. I was one of those people who thought the war was right. When I heard the Emperor give his speech on the radio, I didn't know what to think. But now that I've had time to cool off, I understand that we *were* a little crazy back then. And I think that the democratic thing we're doing now is the right way. So maybe justice isn't anything more than a ghost of an idea. Maybe the winner decides all, and might does make right. That's why"—here, Kiba paused for effect—"that's why, like you say, there are no gods or Buddhas looking out for the little guy. That's why we have the law. Because we can't believe in gods, or Buddhas, or even justice. The law is the only weapon the weak have against the strong. Don't turn away from the law, Harasawa. It's on your side."

Though Kiba's reasoning didn't quite resonate with me, to a lonely, miserable man with nothing to cling to, it was convincing enough. Harasawa walked over to the corner, picked up the small urn and clutched it to himself; then, holding it on his lap, he bowed his head and said he would help us.

I left the row house without saying a word.

Kiba was, in his own way, a very thorough man. I was sure that, just as he had said, he would get his warrant the next day and go pay a visit to the Kuonjis.

How did I feel about that? Was that really the best way to handle the situation?

"Boss—I mean, Detective Kiba. Do you think you could wait just a day before going down to the clinic?"

Why ask him to wait? What could I possibly do?

Kiba looked at me and rolled his eyes as if to say *what now?*

"I know how Mr. Harasawa feels. But there's something I need to straighten out first. I promise I won't destroy any evidence, or do anything else to put the victims here at a disadvantage. I just need to look into this until I'm satisfied nothing has been missed. Please, can you give me just one day?"

"I'm surprised at you, Sekiguchi, after all that. But if that's how you feel, I suppose I should trust your judgment. What exactly are you going to do?"

"I'll contact you tomorrow night. If nothing comes of it by then, you can do whatever you want, search the house, I don't care. I won't complain. The case I'm concerned with and the case of the missing children are two different things, anyway."

That's right.

But what *was* I going to do? What could I hope to accomplish between now and the following evening?

"Very well. How could I deny a request from the one and only Tatsumi Sekiguchi? I'll accept your conditions." Kiba gave me a hearty slap on the shoulder.

With that as my cue, I took off.

I hadn't a moment to waste.

I headed straight for the Kuonji Clinic—

Not that I had a plan for what I would do once I arrived there.

I just knew I needed to see Ryoko as soon as possible—

Not that I knew what I would say when I saw her.

Before long I was racing through the Kishimojin Shrine grounds, running down the dimly remembered path through the woods.

Running just like the first time I was here.

Though I could often see familiar places clearly in my mind, the ways to those places—the roads themselves—were always lost in a haze.

I'm—

I'm not crazy—

I struggled to remember. *Up to that intersection, turn, and then—*

A man came barreling out of the side path.

"Whoa! Hey, it's you. The detective from yesterday!"

It was Naito.

"Er, what's wrong?" he asked me. "You look pale."

Naito's shoulders heaved with every breath. It was a short distance—assuming he had only come from the clinic to this intersection—and he must have run it at full speed. Perhaps the perspiration pouring in rivulets down his forehead was the sign of a weak constitution, or maybe it was a lack of daily exercise coming back to haunt him. In the latter case, I thought, I'd have to question the credentials of a physician who didn't take care of his own health.

"You're the one who's looking pale, Mr. Naito. Did something happen at the clinic?"

"Tell me, Mr. Detective—did you happen to pass anyone on your way up here?" he asked, ignoring my question.

I hadn't seen anyone, or else I lacked the presence of mind to notice.

"Well, you people have been taking your own sweet time! Now we have to deal with this! It's all over the place!" Naito thrust a crumpled-up piece of paper toward me and spread it open. As he did, a fist-sized rock fell out. The paper had been wrapped around it in the manner of threats thrown through windows.

Babies Broiled and Eaten at Demon Hospital!

It was a page from a tabloid, differing only from *True Tales of the Bizarre* in the fine details. It was probably one of the many I'd glimpsed at Harasawa's house.

"A whole stack of these came out, all on the same day. They used to just throw rotten vegetables. Now they're breaking windows, writing graffiti on the walls, shouting."

"Shouting what?" I asked.

"Oh, 'get out, demons!' And 'give us back our children!' And 'you'll die for what you've done!' They say we should apologize to the victims with our lives—and they don't even know the victims!"

"What about the director?"

"Him? After you all left a patient came in yesterday evening. She was in labor all night, so Dr. Kuonji was sleeping all day—completely useless. The head of accounts—that is, his wife—and Ryoko have been dealing with the crowd, and now she's been hurt."

"Hurt? Ryoko?"

"A stone hit her in the chest, yes. You can go to the clinic but I doubt they'll let you see her. Hey—Mr. Detective!"

Already I was running again. I couldn't help but feel that this turn of events was my fault. No, I hadn't done anything to precipitate it. But I had, just a few days before, been prepared to write a story about the Kuonjis for the tabloids—a story like the ones they were suffering over now.

That was just as bad.

Every window in the foyer had been broken, leaving only jagged shards hanging from the window frames. There were stains of something like paint on the walls, half-erased. The place was more a ruin than a functioning hospital.

There is a precarious balance to the life of a building. It has nothing to do with its age, or the beauty of its construction. A damaged building can always be repaired if it still has life, but a dead building will never be whole again.

This hospital was dead.

I did not expect ever to see new glass set in those doors. The fragments on the ground would be crushed into even smaller fragments, and then into dust, as the weather continued to wear away at whatever remained standing. This was no longer a place of healing. Not now. Not anymore.

"What is it?"

The head of administration, a.k.a. the director's wife, was standing amidst the rubble.

"Have you come to help us clear away what's left? Or to laugh at our sorry state? Either way, you can leave. I do not care to see your face here again—not you, nor any of you people."

The woman was clearly exhausted. Her hair was tangled, and the skin around her eyes had lost its luster. Several strands of black hair fell down over her face, making her look as if she was on the point of complete dissolution.

"Ma'am, I'm on your side. If you've got time to chastise your allies, maybe you have time to tell me the truth. You're running out of options pretty quickly. If you won't see me, will you at least let me speak to my client—to Miss Kuonji?"

"Ryoko is abed with an injury. You cannot see her."

"Please. You can keep putting on a bold front here, but you'll watch your clinic crumble around you—and mark my words, it won't last much longer than a day at this rate. If that's what you want, say so, and I'll leave."

Wait, what was I planning to do? How could me meeting with Ryoko now save this family in its nest of ruins from utter collapse?

What was I—

"Ryoko's in her room. In the residential quarters, the furthest one back."

And just like that, the stubborn old women caved in. Moisture glistened at the corners of her eyes. I couldn't tell whether she had been moved to tears or was simply weeping with fatigue.

Stepping around her, I went inside. The hall was strewn with so much rubble that it hardly seemed appropriate to take off my shoes as was customary; yet I did so, putting on a pair of the slippers provided for visitors. The gesture seemed perversely out of place.

"You're going to her—to Ryoko's room? Wait. You... You and Ryoko aren't seeing—"

"Leave the crass conjectures to the tabloids, please," I said, determined to reject her suspicions flat out. *Like Kyogokudo would have.*

Not once did I stop to wonder what I was doing. If I didn't think about it, I wouldn't have to stop. In a matter of moments I found myself standing in front of Ryoko's room, knocking on the door.

"It's me, Sekiguchi. May I come in?"

Before an answer came, my hand went to the doorknob, and turned it, and the door opened.

Ryoko was sitting up in bed. She was wearing light pajamas, through which I could see where she had been treated. A poultice covered her left breast.

It was painful to behold.

"Mr. Sekiguchi..."

Her face was swollen around her eyes from sleep or tears. It had the odd effect of making her look more alive than the usual unhappy mask she wore.

"I'm sorry. You must think me the worst sort of man for barging in like this. Is it all right if I come in?"

Ryoko nodded.

The room was simply furnished. I had never been in a single woman's room before, so I had little basis for comparison, but hers seemed quite barren to me. It was entirely without decoration. Ryoko made to get out of bed but I held out my hand to stop her.

I sat in the chair by her bedside.

"A stone—I was struck in the chest," she told me. "It's just a bruise, no bones were broken. But my heart isn't strong, and—"

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sorry I wasn't able to do more. Those magazines came out at the worst possible time."

Two of the tabloids in question sat on the side board by her pillow.

"They were thrown in here."

"Did you read them?"

"Yes," she said, and nothing further.

I couldn't bear the thought of what she must have gone through as she perused those lurid stories.

"The police have restarted their investigation—not about Makio, mind you."

"You mean the investigation into the missing infants?"

"Yes. They're concerned about the strange circumstances surrounding the death of a nurse who used to work here, Sumie Toda. Their investigation will begin with her, I think."

"Will they be coming here? Do you know when?"

"I bought some time, but only one day. If I cannot uncover the truth before the end of the day tomorrow, then yes, the authorities will come here. And if that happens, then everything—the case of the missing infants as well as Makio's disappearance—will be out. Whatever they uncover will be for all to see. Not just in these tabloids, but in actual newspapers. Even if your family is entirely innocent, it will be destroyed."

"My family already has been destroyed," Ryoko said quietly. "I don't know what to believe anymore. Maybe what this magazine says is the truth. And if it *were* true, if my family *were* the worst kind of criminals, then I would rather acknowledge it, and have us all put to death. How much easier that would be than this." Purple veins showed in a fine tracery across Ryoko's brow; there were lines of anguish in the skin between her eyes.

"Miss Kuonji, you hired me. I'm still on the case. You can't give up now. Only..."

"Yes?"

"You must tell me what you know—the whole truth. There was too much about this case I wasn't aware of from the start, and I feel like I've been wast-

ing time getting to where I need to be. Tell me, are you—have you lied to me at all?”

I'm no better than Enokizu!

Ryoko turned her head to one side and put her hand to her left breast. “I knew about the infants. I heard what people said, and I knew the police had come, but I didn’t speak of it because I thought it had nothing to do with the matter I came to you about. Nor do I know what really happened.” Her anguished look deepened, either from the pain of her wounds, or some pain in her heart. “If I have lied, it is about the night of the disappearance.”

“What?” I asked, astonished, although this was exactly the sort of thing I’d expected to hear.

“To tell the truth, I do not know where I was that night.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Like my sister, I have no memory of it at all.”

I was startled anew.

“I’ve had this problem for quite some time now—I’m not sure when it began—where I lose parts of my memory. It’s as if I go into a daze, and when I come to my senses, I find a whole day has passed, with me not knowing where I have been or what I’ve done for the entire time.”

“Does this happen at particular times?”

Ryoko spent a long moment choosing her words, then raised her eyes, a determined expression on her face. “It’s a little embarrassing, but it often comes at my time of the month. I don’t have many of...of those, however, only a few in a year...” She seemed to be struggling to talk about it.

“Ah, so that night you were, erm—”

“Yes. I have no memory from noon of the day before. I was in this room, and when I came to, I found myself sleeping here. But the date had changed, and it was the middle of the night. More than a day had passed. I asked, but no one had seen me out and about—so perhaps I had been in this room the whole time.

“I’m sorry I lied. But there’s something odd about a family that doesn’t worry at all after not seeing their daughter for a full day, isn’t there?”

Not sure how to respond, I sat there dumbly, staring at Ryoko’s neckline. Then I thought, *What does this have to do with anything? Why is this important? It doesn’t matter where she was. This has nothing to do with the mystery of the sealed room.*

“Am I ill? I know this sort of thing isn’t normal, is it? It’s certainly made it easier to understand my sister when she talks of losing her memory, of course.”

“I don’t think it’s an illness at all,” I was surprised to hear myself say. “Everyone suffers memory impairments at one time or another; it’s merely a difference in degree. Remove the cause, and the symptoms will subside.”

Why was it always like this for me with Ryoko? Always hearing her pain-

ful admissions, offering my half-baked medical advice...

“I don’t know. It seems like an illness, and a very strange one to me. Mr. Sekiguchi, I’m sure you’ve heard of my family history...our cursed blood.”

The cursed blood of the Kuonjis—

Hereditary possession—

“If you mean possession, that’s just superstition. It’s foolishness, and you shouldn’t believe it one bit. I can’t see how people can let such things ruin lives. We’re living in a new age, the age of democracy and science. Not some benighted era where spells and charms hold sway over us.”

“But...” Ryoko spoke over my protestations, “look at this.” She took a piece of paper from a drawer by her pillow and held it out to me. “Naito found this on one of the ginkgos at Kishimojin Shrine. It was stuck to the tree with needles.”

The scrap of paper had been cut into the shape of a person. Sure enough, it was riddled with dozens of tiny holes. Like a prayer tablet at a shrine, it was covered with blotches that might have been characters, so dense that there was more ink than paper visible. The only thing legible was a cluster of five characters in the very center of the figure. It read “Makio Kuonji.”

“You think this is some kind of curse?”

“I do not know. Yet I cannot help but think that democracy and science are powerless in a world where people put these sorts of things up in temples.”

I told her I would look into it, and took the paper from her.

She continued. “My mother, my grandmother, and her mother before her—all of their lives were ruined by this ‘superstition.’ You say ‘don’t believe it,’ Mr. Sekiguchi, but my family, and all families with a history of possession, are tormented the same way whether we believe in it or not. Nothing has improved since we left Sanuki for Tokyo. You see—” Her eyes indicated the magazines on the side board. “It’s exactly the same. And I don’t have the strength to keep fighting it.”

“Miss Kuonji—”

“My father, when he first joined our family, was a logical man who hated superstition in all its forms. I hear he was very angry about how the Kuonji family had been mistreated over the years. But eventually, he grew weary of fighting it, too, and he was forced to accept the facts of the matter. That’s why he wanted me to become a doctor—he realized I would never be able to marry. But I was never good at medicine. With my frail constitution I just couldn’t do all the schooling it requires. I studied for a while to at least become a pharmacist, but that didn’t work out either.”

So Ryoko did have some knowledge of pharmaceuticals. Maybe even about datura—

“I had always wanted to study classical literature.”

My thoughts were interrupted by the unexpected admission.

“Only when I read about medieval times did I feel I could escape from

the reality of the present." Ryoko's gaze shifted to the small bookshelf near her bed. Through its closed glass doors I could see several volumes lined up neatly.

It would have taken a serious scholar to read them. I recognized a few of the names, famous books like the *Collected Tales from Uji*, the *Record of Miracles in Japan*, and *Tales of Times Now Past*—but the rest bore titles that only someone like Kyogokudo would know how to read, and I had no inkling of when they might have been written or what stories their pages held.

"I realize now the escapism didn't work. I almost think that it was my cursed blood that first drew me to that world of haunts and demons. The only thing that gave me real hope back in those days was my sister."

Her sister. Kyoko Kuonji.

"She was always so cheerful and popular. She just shone like a star. I would lie in bed and listen to her tell me about things she had done in school, or places she had gone with her friends. I took pride in her free spirit—she was so lively, so alive. My parents saw it, too; and they started to lay their hopes for our family's future on my sister's shoulders, not mine. We all thought that if anyone could break the cycle of our curse, it was her. For me, it was as though a heavy cross had been lifted from my shoulders."

Ryoko quietly slid her feet out from beneath the blanket and sat on the edge of the bed. She covered her face in both hands. "To think it all led to this misery! I can't bear to watch her weaken and wither away like this. I feel as if her condition now is the way I should have been. It should have befallen me, this curse. I *am* cursed—as is my sister, as is the entire Kuonji family line. It is the only explanation I can come up with. I can't—"

Ryoko began to cry. I had thought there was no beauty to be found in a person weeping, until that moment.

She was beautiful in her tears.

"Mr. Sekiguchi..." she said, and pitched forward into my outstretched arms. Her face came to rest upon my chest, and there she continued crying.

I held her as I had once before.

—No, that had been a delusion.

An erotic, stirring delusion, like a hazy memory from a former life. I moved my arms around her slowly, taking in the warmth of her skin.

"I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't..." she was saying, though she made no move to pull away.

I know her. I know this woman.

"Lift this curse," she then said. "Like in the old tales..."

"Huh?"

"Like the *onmyoji* in the fairy tales—free me from my curse."

"Save me."

At last, I came to my senses. I pulled away from Ryoko. "I'm sorry," I told her, "but I am neither a magician, nor an exorcist. Let alone—"

Abe-no-Seimei . . .

That's it! Why didn't I think of this sooner? He could do this!

It's his job, isn't it?

I grasped Ryoko by the shoulders.

I caught a glimpse of the swell of her white breasts where her thin top hung open.

I shook her hard.

"Miss Kuonji! I have an idea. Tomorrow—we will remove the curse on your house tomorrow!"

"Mr. Sekiguchi?"

"I'll contact you in the morning." With that, I fled the room.

Her mother was standing right outside the door; she looked to be in shock. Maybe she had wondered what was going on. Maybe she had looked in. But none of that mattered to me right then.

It was already dark outside. The Zoshigaya woods were pitch black, so dark that I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

I ran.

I had to see him.

I had to see Kyogokudo.

He could lift the curse!

I ran up the dizzying slope full speed under the moonless night sky.

I arrived at Kyogokudo just before the date changed on the calendar. The day's foul weather hid the moon behind an impenetrable veil, and since the road to the shop was completely lacking in streetlights, the vertiginous slope was so dark I would have had trouble finding my own nose as I stumbled along.

The shop would of course be closed, so I headed for the entrance to the house out back. Unfortunately, my friend had not left his outside light on, and although my eyes had had plenty of time to get accustomed to the night, I found myself enveloped in a darkness so thick that I managed to trip and fall a few times as I made my way toward his door.

Not that there was anything for me to trip on. I was stumbling on the darkness itself.

As I began my fourth lurching fall, I threw my hands out to stop myself and my fingers touched Kyogokudo's door. It rattled loudly. Standing up, I tried to let myself in, but the door was locked at this late hour. I started pounding on it, calling out my friend's name.

I heard something inside—not the master of the house, but that Jinhua cat, meowing and scratching at the door from the other side.

He must be out.

He would have woken by now if he were there—Kyogokudo slept so lightly a cat's yawn would rouse him. Where was he, then? He was never the sort to stay out late drinking or what-have-you, not even when he was a student.

The shrine!

Somehow I knew he was there as soon as I thought of it. I turned around and launched myself back into the darkness, my memory my only guide.

Past the store, into the wood—

Was night always so dark? Growing up in a relatively urban environment, I'd never experienced such complete blackness.

The trees rustled in the wood. They thrived in the dark, alive like they never were during the daylight hours. Suddenly I was afraid.

Was night always—so scary?

How could the world seem so different, merely due to an absence of light? Maybe it was frightening during the day, too; we were just too distracted by the sights to notice, too eager to pretend nothing was amiss.

A sharp pain in my shin alerted me to the presence of an artificially constructed rise in the path. I reflexively fell forward, catching myself on what I assumed were the large stone steps that led to the shrine. Poised on all fours, I looked up.

The night sky had been cut into a square that floated silently before me.

It took some time before I realized that the fantastic portal to another world I thought I saw was in fact the shrine's *torii* gate, its impressively large silhouette—tall, slightly angled posts and gently sloping cross-bar—framing the dim scenery beyond.

The Musashi Seimei Shrine.

I ran up the steps.

Two paper lanterns, each painted with the Seimei crest, lent color to the world around them, the five stars on each keeping evil at bay.

They were the same as the lantern I had been given at Kyogokudo.

The shrine was too small to have a regular priests' office; no doubt my friend was in the main shrine itself.

Orange light spilled from the cracks in the main doors. Without taking off my shoes I ran up the steps, taking them two at a time, until I was standing between the shrine doors and the collections box—a place I would have no business standing under normal circumstances. Craning my neck I peered inside.

The head priest was lying on his side, propped up by an elbow, bathed in the flickering light of the votive candles set upon the altar.

"Hey! Kyogokudo! It's me, Sekiguchi!" I shouted, and pounded twice on the door.

Kyogokudo turned his face toward me. He looked annoyed. "Idiot," he said without even getting up. "Do you know what time it is? Wait, do you know *where* this is, first of all? You're coming to a hall of prayer, within a sacred shrine, within a sanctified—and quiet, I might add—protective wood, at this ungodly hour, running up here with your shoes on, shouting at the top of your lungs and pounding upon these holy doors. I can't help but think that's the work of a madman."

"What? You're one to talk! What kind of head priest lolls about like that in front of the altar, anyway? You're the one who's going to get in trouble with a higher power here."

"Ah, the foolishness continues. Faith isn't about proper form, you know. For me, this posture more than sufficiently indicates my humility before the gods. You can sit in the zen style with legs crossed, or formally with your knees bent beneath you, and still blaspheme in your heart. Conversely, if you have faith, even standing on your head wearing only a loincloth would not diminish it in the least. Form and style only matter in a limited range of circumstances where such things have been decided upon. Take the practice of clapping one's hands before a shrine to summon the gods' attention. Typically, you clap your hands once or twice. Only a fool would clap four times, but at the Great Shrine in Izumo and the Usa Shrine, clapping four times is not only fine, it's expected.* And even though clapping is generally thought of as a way to ex-

*The number four is a homonym for the word "death" in Japanese and is thought to be unlucky.

press respect or appreciation, try clapping at a Buddhist altar and people will frown at you or worse. So me lying here like this is just fine, thank you very much."

"Sorry, but I didn't come here to listen to you edify me on the finer points of religious conduct," I said, standing with the collection box to my back. To a bystander, it would have looked like I was talking directly to the shrine. "I have a favor to ask, so open up."

"Oh, what, you want me to let you, who are neither a shrine attendant nor a local adherent, into the main prayer hall?" the shrine seemed to answer. Now I was receiving an oracle from the gods themselves.

"Then you come out."

"No." Compared to my slightly nasal, watery voice, Kyogokudo's rang out with a clear intensity. "If you've come about the Kuonji case, it's over. I won't have anything more to do with your obsession," my grumpy oracle informed me mockingly.

"Over? Kyogokudo, did you—have you figured out the truth?"

"The truth? I wasn't aware there was such a thing. All I realized was that the case is like a roomful of blind men groping at an elephant. Trying to figure out what they're touching by asking each one what he feels is a waste of time. All you have to do is say 'ah, it's an elephant,' and you're through. And you, Sekiguchi, you're looking right at the elephant, you just haven't realized it yet. Don't you think it's time to put an end to all this nonsense?"

"What am I looking at? Don't mock me like Enokizu does, please. I haven't seen a thing. And I'm not a madman, either."

"Open your eyes, man!" Kyogokudo said from right behind the door. Somehow he had gotten up and walked over without me noticing. I stepped back. "You know, you might really *be* crazy, depending on how one thinks about such things."

"Yeah, I'm crazy all right. If you and Enokizu are both perfectly sane then I'm a raving lunatic! But I don't care about that right now. If you're really a priest, surely you'll lend an ear to a wandering soul in need of direction?"

"I'm a Shinto priest, not a padre."

"Same difference."

Then I began to talk. I told him about Goichi Harasawa, Tokizo and Tomiko, about what Tsuneko Umemoto had said, about Kiba's intentions, what Ryoko had told me of the Kuonji family—

I didn't know whether my friend on the other side of the door was listening or not. I couldn't even tell if he was still there. When at last I stopped speaking the silence fell over me so completely that I felt as if I were the only person left in the world. I felt vulnerable, as if the darkness might reach out at any moment and seize me by the back of my neck.

But then the silence was run through, dying from the thrust of

Kyogokudo's voice.

"Sekiguchi. Don't tell me you're going to get involved with the case of the missing infants as well?"

"If that's at the root of it, then yes. But you know about it all, don't you? You can see the elephant we blind men are pawing. You know what's behind all this."

"Well now, I haven't seen it directly like you have, so I can't say. What's a mystery to me is your attitude."

The priest turned his back to me.

Just then, my fingers touched something in my pocket—the paper charm or curse or whatever it was. I thrust it through the narrow opening in the door, hoping to get my friend's attention.

"Kyogokudo! Look at this. Do you know what it is? Do you know what it's used for?"

"Huh? That's an *enmi*—a curse, like an effigy placed at a shrine on an inauspicious day. This isn't the eleventh century, though. I'm surprised the custom still exists."

"So it's like a voodoo doll, then? Does it—does it really work? I mean, is there really such a thing as a curse?"

That's it—it's a curse. Fujimaki's disappearance, the missing children—no—the entire history of the Kuonji family, all those years of mistreatment, all sprang from a curse.

Assuming that curses really did exist.

"Curses do exist. And what's more, they work. Curses and charms are the same thing, really; they're both spells. Spells are words that give meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. They create value. When that value is positive, we call them charms. When it's negative, we call them curses. Curses are words enabled by the power of a culture."

"I don't care about cultural theory, Kyogokudo. I want to know whether curses can really make people unlucky—whether they can really kill."

"I can tell you they're effective within a community with a shared language and culture."

"Do they have supernatural power?"

"Who gave you that stupid idea? Curses are... Well, they're like a time bomb set in the brain. I don't expect you to understand."

It didn't matter what I understood. If he said they worked, they worked. That was all I wanted to know.

"All right then. Can you undo that curse?"

There was no answer.

"Well? Can you? Kyogokudo!"

"I can. But why are you—"

"Then do it!"

"Rid the Kuonjis of their curse!"

For a split second, the darkness around me was reversed, and all that was black became white.

The pattern of the wood grain on the sun-bleached temple doors was burned into my retinas—I could still see it floating in space even after the darkness returned.

I heard the rumble of thunder. A moment later, the rain began. Large drops fell stingingly, each one punishing me for the fool I was.

"I refuse," Kyogokudo said, his voice clearer than the muffled thunder.

"You can't refuse! Isn't this what you do? Isn't it a part of your job?"

"I have my policy, Sekiguchi. I won't be responsible for people dying or getting hurt as a result of my actions. Leave this ridiculous affair alone and it will resolve itself."

"I fail to see what's ridiculous about it!"

Another flash of lightning opened the darkness once more. I saw my friend's face like a ghost behind the door-lattice, the image lasting long after the light had gone.

And that was all. Kyogokudo—the spirit of the shrine—was through dispensing its oracles.

"Well, I'm not leaving until you take this job. I'm serious, Kyogokudo! You hear me?" I could taste the desperation in my own raised voice. I sat down there on the step, though the movement was more like a collapse of my weakened knees than the imperious squat I had intended. I slid down with my back to the collection box, and every muscle in my body relaxed.

The warm rain beat down upon my skin.

Was I going crazy?

—*He's a crazy.*

Why had I been so scared of her?

Why so frightened of a little girl?

She had laughed.

That white, wax-sculpture skin.

Parted lips like the petals on a cherry blossom.

A white blouse.

A dark skirt.

Two white calves.

And a line of red, bright red—

—*Mm hm hm.*

—*Want to play?*

Whispering, lustily, into my ear.

No. It wasn't her who had been lustful.

It was me.

I had taken her—

Kyoko Kuonji.

The sensation of her in my arms was no memory from a past life.

Right there, before the reception desk, in that hospital, the girl my friend loved, those white calves, and red, red—

"Aah!"

I shouted with the realization.

That's why I had run.

What girl—not a prostitute, but a young, innocent schoolgirl—would say "let's play" like that?

It was me who was lustful. Me.

What have I done?

I fled the scene, running as fast as I could.

Was I crazy? No, not crazy. I ran.

I ran through the Kishimojin Shrine, through the rustling woods in Zoshigaya. It was dark, pitch black. I ran through the graveyard—but where was I running to? The asylum in Sugamo? No. I was running back to our dormitory. My student dormitory, where Chuzenji, Enokizu, and Makio Fujino were waiting.

The door opened.

Chuzenji was standing there.

That's right. I'll tell him everything. That way, he'll—

"Chuzenji! I—the girl Fujimaki loves, Kyoko Kuonji, I—"

What had I done to Kyoko Kuonji?

"That's enough of that. No one needs to hear about your little cutout snip-pet of reality from twelve years ago."

Chuzenji—no, Kyogokudo—was standing there, a lit candlestick in his hand.

I came rolling back from September 16, 1935 like a man tumbling down a hill.

"Kyogokudo, I—"

"I think you're the one who's most in need of an exorcism here, Sekiguchi," he said, letting the candlelight fall across my face. "Your weak nerves won't last another three days like this. You're a great deal of trouble, *sensei*, you know that? And I know it's summer, but you're going to catch your death

of cold."

As he spoke I became aware of my condition.

I was soaked to the bone. I was covered in scrapes and bruises, and my clothes were stained with blood. My right shin was swollen black and red where I had banged it on the stone steps on my way up; my pants leg was torn.

I realized I had been sitting there a long time—maybe three hours or more?—lost in visions of the past.

The pelting rain had turned to a light mist.

"I'm on the job, but I warn you: I'm not cheap."

It took me a considerable length of time before I realized what he was talking about.

"You mean, you'll do it? You'll free the Kuonjis from their curse?"

"I have several conditions. Accept them, or I walk," Kyogokudo said, looking at me with his usual detached air.

I sat there dumbly, hanging on his words.

"The time will be eight o'clock tonight—there's something I want to look into first, so we can't do it right away. The place will be the sealed room where Fujimaki vanished. No other place will do. I want all the Kuonjis and the other people concerned gathered in the adjacent room by the appointed time. Except Tokizo and his wife—we won't be needing them.

"Ready five chairs, including yours. Kyoko's in bed, so she won't need one. I won't need one either. Also—"

Kyogokudo paused and handed me a hand towel. I took it. He evidently intended for me to wipe myself off, but I was unsure of how to proceed, so I merely sat there clutching it and staring at him.

"This is the most important part. Listen carefully. I want you to contact Kiba, and get two or three policemen in plain clothes, tough guys, up there on the sly. They need to be ready to go in at a moment's notice. Maybe have them wait in the garden or another room."

"But that's—"

"If you don't solve the case today, they'll be coming in tomorrow, won't they? They'll just be barging in a few hours early, that's all."

"Well, that's true, but why have them there at all?"

"To catch anyone who runs, of course."

"You mean when the curse is lifted, somebody's going to try to run? Who? Fujimaki? Or maybe—"

"Don't try to think too hard about it. Your head's far too fuzzy for that right now. In fact, it's better if you don't think at all. I'm not done, in any case."

"What, there's more?"

"Hey, if you don't like it, I'm happy to call the whole thing off."

"No, that's not what I meant."

It finally occurred to me to scrub the rain from my face with the towel.

"In addition to the police, we'll need a medical team—a medical examiner like Satomura would do nicely. Someone good, in any case. Have them on standby. I can accept injuries if I must, but I don't want anyone dying. Luckily, the place being what it is, we shouldn't have any need for medical supplies. To repeat myself, I don't want someone to die because of anything I do, either directly or indirectly, and that's that."

I told him I accepted his conditions.

It was already past five in the morning, but the clouds hid the disk of the sun so thoroughly that dawn never really came, and for a long time I sat in a stupor, as if I wandered in a nightmare from which I could not awaken.

At Kyogokudo's house, he let me use his bath, and afterwards I rested awhile on the tatami. Eventually I folded the light futon in quarters and used it as a pillow, curling up like a cat. Though my nap didn't last long, I slept voraciously.

When I woke it was already past nine. It was still raining outside. Kyogokudo was nowhere to be seen; there was a note and a house key sitting on top of the low table.

The note was written in Kyogokudo's dense hen scratches that were either high art or a total mess—I could never be certain which. Its contents were as mundane as they came: lock the door on your way out, take the key with you, it's a spare—that sort of thing.

I made use of the lavatory, shaved my stubble, drank two cups of water, and locked the door on my way out, borrowing an umbrella from the stand in front.

I didn't feel like going home, so I went to a used clothing store and picked up a cheap shirt and some trousers. I examined my own pants while they were doing the hems, and discovered that they were not only ripped in several places, but the rain and mud and blood had stained them so badly they would probably never be wearable again. I had the shopkeeper toss them along with my shirt. He raised an eyebrow and asked, anachronistically, if I had met bandits on the road.

I started to feel like I had not been home in a very long time. In my mind's eye I saw my wife's face, and it gave me a warm, slightly languid feeling akin to nostalgia.

After a late lunch at a small restaurant, I borrowed the restaurant phone and rang Kiba to give him the details of our arrangement.

The detective laughed about "that Kyogoku, always up to some charade,"

and told me he would come to the bottom of the slope of vertigo in his Jeep at seven to pick me up.

I wanted to call Ryoko next, but I hesitated, holding the receiver in my hand. Really, I should have called her before contacting Kiba, but I hadn't because I had no idea what to tell her. The glare of the restaurant owner—an old man with bristling eyebrows—spurred me to action, so I dialed and told her simply that I would be bringing an *onmyoji* to the clinic that night.

She seemed surprised by the suddenness of the whole affair, but in the end I got her to promise that she would gather the rest of her family, Naito, and five chairs in the appointed place by eight o'clock. My head was foggy, just as Kyogokudo had said. I had lost the ability to speak with any artfulness at all, so I said what I had to as plainly as possible—which, all things considered, was perhaps the best thing for the situation anyway.

After I hung up I started to worry whether Ryoko would be able to convince her stubborn father and obdurate mother to go along with the plan. My duplicity in not telling her about Kiba and his men—who would be lying in ambush outside their clinic—cast a pall of gloom over me.

What exactly was I trying to accomplish? I had bargained for an extra day, and here I was, wasting it by doing nothing.

I began to think, despite Kyogokudo's warning that I should not.

There were too many things I still didn't know. The case had become so convoluted that I couldn't tell what was plain and what was still a mystery. Fujimaki had disappeared, and three infants had vanished—these were facts. Nonetheless, I didn't think that these things were the root of the problem. What exactly was the elephant I was supposed to be looking at?

A white mist drifted through my mind. Through the swirling eddies I caught a glimpse of a girl—Kyoko Kuonji, hiding in the shadows. It was muggy and hot, yet the rain only seemed to be coming down harder. I wanted to find a place where I could relax, if only a little.

Partly for shelter from the rain, I went into a quaint little coffee shop near the station—quaint in this case meaning not cozy, but run-down. Some classical music I'd never heard was playing inside, and it was dark, though for all that the air there was no cooler than on the sweltering street outside.

I phoned Kyogokudo. He was home, and so I told him that Kiba would be coming to the bottom of the hill to pick us up at seven. The shop's telephone, in stark contrast to the rest of the place, was the latest Mark IV model, and it felt odd using such a thing in such a place.

Then I settled into an uncomfortable chair, the springs of which were poking out through the upholstery, and drank a cup of coffee from which all flavor had fled. Somehow I managed to relax to the point where I dozed off.

Around 6:50, I was standing at the bottom of the slope, below the long

oil-clay walls holding their city of graves. It seemed an entirely new place to me, perhaps because of the rain, perhaps because I'd never before just stood there taking in the scenery.

Two jeeps arrived suddenly with a great deal of noise, their tires throwing up sheets of muddy water. The door of the front jeep opened halfway and Kiba stuck his head out like a gargoyle peering from a rooftop. "Sorry to keep you waiting in this! Get in!" he shouted over the rain.

I hurried toward him, folding my umbrella as I ran, and jumped into the back seat. In that short distance, what with my clumsy fumbling to open the door, I managed to get completely soaked.

"This here's Aoki. He's my, well, my underling of sorts. Satomura's in the car behind us with two of his helpers and Kinoshita—a big guy. Kinoshita is a judo champion, and Aoki here is—er, well, he's one of those kamikazes that didn't make it in time."

Aoki, a very serious-looking young man, blushed at this introduction, told Kiba to knock it off, and nodded curtly to me.

Then my usually talkative friend fell silent. I had nothing else to say, and so a tense quiet filled the Jeep.

"What the hell is he planning to do, anyway?" Kiba said after several minutes had passed.

The rain was falling in thin rivulets from the sky, and the world outside the car was indistinct, a collection of images seen through fogged glass.

A light glimmered halfway up the dark slope. Kiba squinted his eyes. "Hmph," he snorted. "The demon's come down from the mountain."

I saw the star pattern—the Seimei crest—gleaming in the midst of black cloth. It was that lantern. Through the haze of rain on the roadway, the strangely attired figure of a man appeared. He was holding an oil-paper umbrella, and he wore a simple black kimono, so dark it looked as if it had been dyed with charcoal ink. His thin, black overcoat was emblazoned with the Seimei stars as well. He had wrist plates that covered the backs of his hands, black *tabi* socks, and black wooden sandals. Only the straps of the sandals were dyed a bright red.

It was Kyogokudo.

Kyogokudo had finally descended the hill.

The skin around his eyes was dark, almost as if he had rubbed charcoal around them, making him look strikingly gaunt.

This was a side of my friend I had never seen.

Kyogokudo approached the car without a sound, quietly opened the door, and wordlessly slid into the back.

He looked almost dry, as his black clothes gave the water nothing to reflect. He ignored me, as if I weren't even there; leaning forward, he whispered something in Kiba's ear. Kiba grunted and said something back. I thought

maybe they were confirming the plan. Maybe it was something they didn't want me to know. I couldn't think of anything to say to them, so I looked out the window to avoid having to watch.

All I could see in the glass was my own dumbfounded face. It was already too dark to make out anything on the road outside.

Ting. I thought I heard a wind chime ring, but I knew it was a trick of my ears.

Kiba introduced Aoki. Aoki nodded and looked at Kyogokudo as a scolded student might look at his teacher.

"Atsuko will be joining us at the clinic. I called her to look into something for me, and she insisted that she be allowed to come. I couldn't see any way of getting around it, so I let her. Sorry I couldn't warn you earlier."

Kyogokudo said nothing further for the entire trip.

The Kuonji Clinic on that rainy night looked like nothing so much as a giant, desolate crag—a mound of brick and steel that rose forlornly from the woods around it.

So as not to raise suspicions, we parked the jeeps just before the intersection and headed toward the compound on foot.

Atsuko Chuzenji was standing in front of the main gate beneath a large umbrella. She bowed curtly when she saw our party, then fell into line behind us without a word. Kiba's team went toward the pediatrics ward, going through the garden so they wouldn't be seen, to wait by the edge of the wood behind the hospital buildings. The two Chuzenjis and I made straight for the main building foyer.

The foyer was in much the same state of disarray as it had been the day before. The family must have given up trying to clean it. There was nothing to keep the rain out, and it blew in sheets through the open windows and onto the floor, wetting the shards of broken glass that mingled with the rubble there, completing the transformation of the building to a ruin.

The foyer light had also been broken; the only source of illumination now was an interior lamp far back in the hallway, serving to make the place seem even more desolate, and me even more nervous.

I peered inside and saw Ryoko, standing in the ruins.

"Thank you for coming."

She was wearing a white blouse and a black skirt—the same outfit she'd had on the day before.

"Miss Kuonji, this is—" I turned to introduce my friend, but Kyogokudo had already wiped the rain from his umbrella and slid past me to stand before her in his raven-black vestments.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Ryoko Kuonji." He stepped

soundlessly closer and introduced himself as "Kyogokudo."

"You are the *onmyoji*?"

"I'm not sure what my acquaintance here has told you, but if you prefer that antiquated term, then yes, that is what I am. I must ask, is everyone gathered?"

"Yes, they're in the room next to the place you requested—the archive, that is. Are you really here to rid our family of its curse?"

Kyogokudo chuckled nasally. "Why yes, I've come to drive out the evil that has made its nest here. I've come to drive out your *ubume*."

"*Ubume*?"

"That evil which strikes fear into men's hearts, and leaves lives in ruin."

"That's from the *Hundred Stories of Many Lands*. The *ugume* monster from the stork woods—in volume five, I believe it was."

"You are well read. Then you must know that I am here to play the role of the idiot samurai of that tale."

"So you will cut down the demon to find that it is only a night heron? But, Mr. Kyogokudo, what if it truly is a demon and not a heron at all?"

"They are one and the same," said Kyogokudo, smiling at Ryoko with a gleam in his eye.

Not having read the story they were talking about, I was lost in their exchange. I merely stood and watched them: the man all in black, and the monochrome woman. I could feel the color draining from the world.

All at once I had a kind of belated epiphany. This man, Kyogokudo, was the last person I should have brought here. Kyogokudo and Ryoko were the kind of people that should never be brought together.

Ryoko and Enokizu were similar: dolls, residents of another world, not our own. But Kyogokudo was different. He wasn't a doll at all. He was a puppeteer. Though I had no grounds for my suspicion, somehow I knew that, far more than any policeman or private eye, this man had the power to bring the cursed Kuonji household to its final ruination.

And the one who had led him here—

Was me.

A sudden fear gripped me. But it was already too late for anything to be done. Ryoko was leading Kyogokudo inside.

Just then, I heard the wailing of a baby mingled with the sound of the pattering rain. A sharp chill ran down my spine, as if a sluice of ice water had been opened over my head.

It's a birth-wail. The ubume.

No—I realized it had to be the baby that had been born at the clinic two nights before.

"*Sensei*?"

Atsuko looked up at me, and I forced my rigid legs to move forward.

Ryoko stopped midway down the hall at what appeared to be a nurse's station. She leaned in and said, "I'll be back in a while." So there did seem to be a new baby here, now, in the main building of this clinic.

We had to put on our footwear again to walk down the corridor between the buildings. My socks were soaked through, and it took me some time to get my shoes on.

We went through the annex, and then the new building, finally arriving at the old pediatrics ward. By this point I had resigned myself to what was to come, and I followed meekly after the other three.

Ryoko disappeared into the bedroom, and Kyogokudo signaled with his eyes for his sister to come closer. He whispered briefly in her ear. Atsuko seemed nervous, and after waiting for a moment as I fumbled with my slippers, she disappeared quietly down the central hallway. I surmised that she would be opening up the back door so Kiba's men could come in.

Kyogokudo motioned for me to enter first.

I hesitated. I knew that when I opened the door, every eye in the room would be on me.

However, my fears were, to some extent, unwarranted. Every eye *was* on me when I walked in, but I found the collective gaze of the Kuonjis to be strangely lacking in animosity. The mother was sitting perfectly upright, showing none of the fatigue that had gripped her the day before. The director sat slouched as usual, his legs apart, eyes lazily turned upward as I walked in. Naito was having a cigarette by the window. He only watched me from the corners of his eyes. Their stare was devoid of unity—a broken thing, merely several individuals looking at me at the same time.

"Oh, it's you," the old director said. "Aren't you that private eye who came by the other day? Eh? That the faith healer behind you? First a detective, next a medicine man. This is the last time we go along with your foolishness, Ryoko. Who knows what rumors will spread after this? I can't have them vandalizing our front door every time you get one of your fanciful ideas."

It was clear from everything in his manner that the director wasn't taking this gathering seriously at all.

The other two in the room were quiet. Ryoko was standing by the door to the sealed room, looking in my direction—not at me, but at Kyogokudo.

"Just what do you think you're doing? What can you possibly do for us?" the mother said in a trembling voice.

Kyogokudo slid deftly past me where I stood frozen in the doorway and strode into the middle of the room.

"The faith healer?" the director said, his eyes moving slowly up and down Kyogokudo, measuring his worth. Then he leaned forward, as if to stop him from coming any closer. "Well, know this: you can't pull the wool over my

eyes. My wife might be superstitious, but I'm a scientist."

Kyogokudo seemed entirely unperturbed. "If you are indeed a scientist, then I would expect you to have a more rational understanding of your situation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm sure you have a general idea of what I'm about to do, and what will come of it, yes?"

The old man looked taken aback for a moment. Then he pursed his lips like an octopus. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I haven't the faintest clue about exorcisms or prayer-men. Can't see why I'd be expected to know anything, either! I don't believe in your ghosts or curses, thank you very much!"

Kyogokudo soundlessly slipped behind the old man's chair and spoke to the back of his balding head. "I don't believe in those things either, my good man," he said, perfectly calmly.

"Wha-t?" the director said a little too loudly, and he snapped around to face the faith healer, but there was no one behind his chair. The black-robed intruder had circled further around to once again attack from the back of his head.

"Stop deceiving yourself. There is nothing that is strange in this world. There is only that which should be, and only that which should happen does."

The old man's octopus-face boiled a bright red.

He turned, but Kyogokudo deftly avoided his gaze once more, continuing to speak from behind. Eventually, the doctor ceased attempting to follow Kyogokudo with his eyes. Face still red, he let his gaze drop to the floor.

"Even if you do not believe, I am here to tell you that things are as you dimly suspect them to be. But that is not why I have come. My single purpose here is to open this door," Kyogokudo indicated the door to the sealed room, "and lead you all inside."

"But that's—just what are you..." the old man's words slurred into silence.

Then the black-robed reaper standing behind him spoke again in a high firm voice: "I do not propose anything difficult. Only that you see what there is to see with your own eyes."

I felt like I was watching a spider catching prey in its web.

The old man was helpless in Kyogokudo's hands.

Just like I had been.

"Fascinating. Truly fascinating!" Naito said, as if he had been waiting his turn. "How is it that these people Ryoko brings consistently manage to undermine my expectations? First we have a private eye dressed like a pilot, and now a faith healer in a black kimono. When I heard an exorcist was coming to rid us of our demons, I admit I expected something like a *yamabushi* ascetic

or one of those warrior monks from Mt. Hiei. But this—this is Sukeroku from the theater!”

Though Kyogokudo's attire was nothing like that of the gallant swash-buckling playboy from the kabuki play, I did see a certain similarity in his attitude.

“And he tells us he doesn't believe in ghosts? I may be inexperienced, but I've never met a man of the cloth who outright denies the spirits of the dead exist!”

Kyogokudo moved to stand directly before Naito. “Is that so surprising?” he asked, his tone conversational. “You do know that reincarnation is a principal tenet of Buddhism? Those who have finished their lives are born again upon one of the six paths without fail. There's no time for them to wander around before coming back. Thus, Buddhism does not accept the existence of ghosts.” The black-robed man took a step closer. “And what about Christianity? It merely says that those who die without being baptized go to hell. Those who have faith are welcomed into heaven. There is a devil, as there is a God, but no room is left for ghosts.”

Naito, in his white doctor's uniform, drew back, looking away.

“Islam is little different,” Kyogokudo continued. “It's only important that one follow the teachings of the Koran, living according to Allah's will. Your destination after death depends on how well you accomplish this, but you are sure to go somewhere. So, we can say that the three major world religions leave no place for ghosts in their teachings. After all, religion is for the living, not the dead.”

Again, Kyogokudo spoke in a high, clear voice, taking one step closer with each break in his words. “So you see that being a religious man, and acknowledging the existence of ghosts, are, strictly speaking, incompatible. Mr. Naito!” Now Kyogokudo was bearing down on him. “I think it's high time you amended your inexperienced opinion of the matter. That, and...” he added tauntingly, “I'm not a man of the cloth, strictly speaking. Just like you're not a doctor.”

Naito grimaced and looked up. Kyogokudo met his glare straight on.

“I thought you came to undo our curse? How's a layman supposed to do that? What can you do?!”

“Like I've been telling you, all I plan to do is lead all of you through that door.”

Naito's gaze followed his finger to the archive door, and he blanched. “R-Ryoko. I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I care to stay for this séance or exorcism or whatever it is. I think I liked that shady private eye fellow better. Even in the extremely unlikely case that this man is some kind of miracle worker who can speak with the dead, who needs him anyway? Makio is still alive!”

Ryoko said nothing. She merely looked out the window through a crack

in the curtains, her gaze as far away as if she were looking at the very end of the world.

The *onmyoji* spoke. “Does the thought of going into that room frighten you so much, Mr. Naito?”

“What? Why? Th-That's ridiculous!”

“Then do you have some proof to substantiate your repeated assertion that Makio still lives?”

“Proof? I don't need proof, you—”

“Then perhaps it's not about what you know, but what you want. Even though, in truth, you'd rather he were dead, you need Makio to be alive, don't you.”

“What are you talking—”

“There's no need for concern.”

“I assure you, Makio is most certainly dead.”

Everyone in the room stiffened. Without any warning, this man, this intruder, had said the one thing that everyone had been thinking but none was willing to admit—that thing not even Enokizu had been able to say for certain.

“Dead?” Ryoko slowly turned her eyes to Kyogokudo.

“Yes. And that's not all. His ghost is possessing you, Mr. Naito.”

Naito's face went pale. “B-But you just said there were no such things as ghosts. Stop fooling around!”

“All I said was I didn't believe in them. But for someone like you, who does, ghosts are very real, and very efficacious.”

“What are you talking about?” Naito shouted at the walls. His gaze darted around the room. It was as if he had completely forgotten he was talking to Kyogokudo.

“Since Makio disappeared you've had no appetite. You can't focus for any length of time. You can't sleep. You can't stop drinking, you failed the national examinations, and you've been hearing things—all because you're possessed.”

“This has gone far enough,” Mrs. Kuonji said, speaking at last. “First you intrude on our home, claiming to be some kind of *onmyoji*, and now you say you don't believe in all that. I'm afraid I fail to see your point, if there is any point to all of this.”

Inwardly I agreed with her that, on the surface, what Kyogokudo had been saying did seem self-contradictory. But I could see what he was doing: cleverly slipping past their defenses, striking each where he or she was most vulnerable. There *was* a point, though perhaps it was too sharp, and Kyogokudo wielded it

like a master. This was evident from the fact that both Naito and the director now sat quiet and sullen, dogs with their tails between their legs.

"Sensei."

I heard Atsuko's voice behind me. She pushed gently against my back, and for the first time I realized that I had been standing in the open doorway. I stepped forward, and she carefully closed the door behind us, not making any noise. I assumed that she'd just come from letting Kiba's gang into the building so they would be ready to leap into action the moment their presence was required.

"I must confess I have no idea what you're doing in this house, or what you plan to do in the next room," the lady of the house concluded. She was sitting as she had the day before, rigid with pride, without so much as glancing in Kyogokudo's direction even as she addressed him.

Yet it seemed to me that the woman lacked the kind of unapproachable strength she had shown the first time I met her. Now she had a hunted, wary look, her eyes averted as if she feared falling into some unseen trap. It was difficult to watch her for long.

"Me?" Kyogokudo replied. "I plan to do nothing. Certainly nothing approaching the tricks you've tried, Mrs. Kuonji. Very troubling, those, by the way."

"Tricks? What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"No use in feigning ignorance. Especially not now, when the very *shiki* you invoked has come back to haunt you."

From his pocket Kyogokudo produced the paper figurine I had given him, thrusting it before her eyes.

"What?! How did you—"

Kyogokudo cleared his throat. "They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and yours is more dangerous than most. It's not hard to imagine that the Kuonjis have a history of possession, but, if one were to go back far enough, you'd also be found to belong to a certain school of *onmyodo*. Yet these things are not to be done lightly. 'When you curse someone, best dig two graves,' the saying goes. Your misguided curse has backfired on you, just like in the old story—and just as it happened so long ago, it has brought ruin on your house."

Mrs. Kuonji stared straight ahead, her eyes unfocused.

"You're saying the *shiki* was...was reversed? By whom? Who could have?"

"What's all this now?" the director asked of no one in particular. "What's this *shiki* thing you two are talking about?"

It was not Kyogokudo who answered, but Ryoko.

"The *shiki* are demons used by the *onmyoji*—their familiars."

The director turned a confused look on Kyogokudo. "Oh-ho? So we don't

believe in ghosts, but gods and demons, why, they're all over the place!"

The bookseller-priest lifted an eyebrow. "I fear your daughter's explanation is a touch on the bookish side," he said. "She's personifying, as many have in the past, what is little more than a tool. A *shiki* is simply a formula. It can be cultural, like a funeral or graduation, or mathematical."

"Eh? You mean like one plus one equals two?"

"Certainly. When we say 'one,' we are speaking of a singular existence. For instance, say I have one apple. If I place another beside it, what do I have?"

"You'd have two apples. One plus one is two. Simple enough. What of it?"

"An excellent answer, and quite right. Rules such as these are not made to be broken, or even bent. One plus one will always equal two. However, you must understand that to speak of apples in this way is to *classify* them, as 'apples,' ignoring the individual differences between one apple fruit and the next. You see, no matter how hard you look, you're never going to find something called 'two apples' in nature. All you'll find is one apple, and another apple. Each is a separate object, a separate existence. Our word 'apples' here is, in fact, a kind of spell which causes two to become one. The concept of 'addition' is a formula—a *shiki*. And the act of addition is the application thereof."

The old doctor nodded, grinning. "Very clever explanation, sir. You have a way with words, I'll give you that." I could tell he was biding his time, waiting for this black-robed intruder to trip somewhere in his reasoning and reveal a weakness of some kind. All other judgments on what Kyogokudo was saying were suspended until Kuonji found a vulnerability he could exploit.

Kyogokudo continued. "So when I speak of invoking a formula—a *shiki*—I am not talking about any supernatural goings-on. Far from it. We cannot defy or hope to surpass the rules and workings of nature. The only difference here is the addition of human intent—which is itself nothing unusual. Certainly the outcomes it may create are quite predictable. Yet if we are ignorant of the underlying formula and look only at its effects, it becomes something magical—like showing a radio to a caveman. If, as is the case, a butterfly beating its wings in China can affect the weather in Europe, then it does not require a great leap of faith to understand that a single piece of paper, properly applied, might destroy a man's life."

This, I presumed, was an attack on Mrs. Kuonji.

"However—" Kyogokudo turned to the lady of the house. She was still sitting, staring blankly ahead into empty space. "If you err in your formula, you will never arrive at the correct answer. If you wish to make three from one, you must add two, multiply by three, or add five and divide by two. As your husband said, one *plus* one is always two."

"You say that I applied the formula...wrongly?" she managed with some effort.

"Yes. And rather dramatically at that. In any case, the intended target, Makio, is no longer with us in this world. I'm afraid your *shiki* went out and came right back"—Kyogokudo smoothly turned to look at Ryoko—"and is causing your daughter terrible unhappiness."

Mrs. Kuonji looked pale, deflated—I could almost see the life drain out of her.

"You should have realized long before now that it was you yourselves who have cursed this house over the generations, for hundreds of years."

No one spoke. It was fair to say that no one remained in that room with the strength to fend off Kyogokudo's unrelenting assault.

"Well, now that introductions are out of the way... Sekiguchi? Let us proceed."

The faith healer beckoned me toward him. I glanced quickly behind me and saw Atsuko, looking nervous, standing in the doorway, effectively blocking the exit.

Kyogokudo stopped Ryoko, who was approaching the archive door.

"That's all right," he said. Then he motioned for me to open the door and go inside.

I clumsily grasped the knob. My friend leaned toward me and spoke in a quiet voice, barely loud enough for me to hear.

"Remember, you wanted this."

The door opened. This time, by my hand.

That smell of antiseptic, that unseasonable chill...

The wall of books loomed large before me.

Everything was exactly as it had been before, except that there were five folding chairs, evenly spaced, sitting to the right of Kyoko's bed, and the bed itself was hidden behind three small movable partitions of the kind usually seen at hospitals—the sort made with a bar frame from which cloth sheets are hung to provide privacy for a patient. Now the screens hid Kyoko's distended form from our prying eyes—a consideration I attributed to her sister.

Closing the door behind us, Kyogokudo contemplated the scene for some time, a look of disgust on his face. Then, glancing at me, he sighed. I hadn't said a word since coming into the room. Without speaking he left me there and moved around to stand by Kyoko's pillow.

My eyes followed him, and came to rest on Kyoko's face, which I could see now through a gap in the partitions. She looked worn, even more than she had the previous time I saw her. Suddenly I pictured her as the young girl I'd encountered so many years ago. For a moment I feared the mist in my head would overtake me again, but my anxiety was unfounded. My head remained clear; I felt a slight nervous shiver pass behind my eyes—like a brief dizzy

spell—and that was all.

Kyogokudo stood at the head of the girl's bed. "Hello, Miss Kyoko Kuonji," he said in a whisper, "pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Chuzenji. I was friends with Makio in school."

Kyoko seemed unsure of what was going on. She had a blank look on her face. "Well," she said, "I'm sorry to disappoint you. My husband isn't here right now. And I'm afraid I'm not much of a host, bed-ridden as I am."

"Please, don't trouble yourself on my account. You can lie right there and that will be fine. There is one thing I want to ask you, though. I see your child is quite well on its way, but tell me, does it ever speak to you from inside your belly?"

Kyoko smiled happily. "I'm sorry, but it does not."

"So it never tells you to do anything, or gives you any orders?"

"My! I can't say I've ever heard of any baby doing such a thing. Do they?"

"Sometimes. But I am pleased to hear that yours does not."

"If it has, then I do not remember. I fear it will be sometime before it's born, at this rate." Kyoko smiled again.

"I was wondering," Kyogokudo asked, "do you still love your husband, Makio?"

"Of course. He is the father of this child."

Though I couldn't see it from where I stood, I sensed that Kyoko was rubbing her distended belly as she said this. Her eyes were unfocused, looking at something far away, not of this world.

"It relieves me to hear you say that. After all, Makio has been deeply in love with you for over a decade now. I don't think he ever wrote a love letter in his life, save the one he wrote to you."

"Kyogokudo!"

Don't mention the letter!

Kyoko's reaction to his words was as sharp as it had been when I broached the subject before. "I—I know nothing about this love letter! Why do all of you—"

"Of course you don't know about it. It was never delivered to you."

"What?" Kyoko's eyes went wide, and the angry light faded from them, Kyogokudo's swift response thwarting her rising wrath.

"You mean I didn't receive a love letter?"

"That's right. So how could you know about it? But it is true that he wrote one. It was I who told him to do so."

But she did receive it! I was the one who gave it to her; she was the one who took it from me! I shouted these things in my heart, but I couldn't bring myself to speak the words. The only thing that came to my mouth was a weak groan that quickly faded into the quiet room.

Kyoko's face was twisted and she wept like a little girl, large tears rolling down her cheeks. "So he really did write me a love letter."

"Of course. Makio is nothing if not single-minded. I'm sure he never thought of another woman after he met you."

"But I thought he—my sister—"

"You are mistaken. He has loved you and you alone for twelve years, even as he loves you now."

"I didn't, I—"

Kyoko stopped crying and looked up at Kyogokudo. Her eyes seemed to cling to his black robes for support.

"He was never good at expressing his feelings. Neither were you. Your affections passed each other by, never quite matching up, like two sides of a mis-buttoned shirt. It's a very common situation, not unusual at all."

"Then I've been a terrible fool."

"It's all right. He will forgive you. But, in order for that to happen, you must remember everything."

"Remember?"

"Yes. Everything about him. About *that night*. About what you did."

Kyoko's eyes opened wider.

"Take your time. You can remember slowly. There's no rush. When the time comes, there will be a signal, and Makio will appear—"

I heard a ringing in my ears.

"—and all will be forgiven."

Like the volume being turned up on a radio, the noise of the rain outside grew suddenly, assaulting my senses.

Kyogokudo looked back at me, a feral gleam in his eye.

"Unfortunately, there's a barrier here I'll have to deal with. I want you to watch what happens. Watch closely! You'll have to recall everything later. I doubt your word will be acceptable as evidence, but you will have to testify all the same."

"Your seat is over there," he added, indicating the chair closest to Kyoko's feet. Of the five chairs lined up there it was also the closest to the door.

I sat, and Kyogokudo went to the door and opened it, beckoning in the Kuonjis.

Ryoko entered first, all color drained from her face. She was pale to the point of translucency. Her mother came in next, her hairdo in disarray. The lines of weariness on her face seemed deeper than ever. Then came Naito, full of nervous energy as always. His eyes seemed to be constantly refocusing, and were thoroughly bloodshot, as though he had been drinking heavily the night before; large drops of sweat glistened on his forehead like jewels. Bringing

up the rear was the director, his face red, his eyes half-lidded or maybe even closed.

Everyone moved slowly through the thick still air.

At Kyogokudo's instruction, they sat with Ryoko closest to Kyoko's pillow, with her mother next to her, then Naito, and finally the director—the same order in which they had entered the room, oddly enough. I looked at the director's face in profile as he sat next to me. His eyes were indeed firmly shut.

Once everyone was seated, Kyogokudo went again to the door and closed it, his every motion extremely slow and measured. Then, without making a sound, he moved to stand at the head of the bed between Kyoko and her sister.

Then he began to chant.

"No-maku-san-man-da-ba-sa-ra-da-sen-da-ma-ka-ro-sha-ta-ya-so-wa-ta-ra-ya-un-ta-ra-ta-kan-man!"

It was a mantra. After all that he had said in the other room, there was not a person sitting there who wasn't completely startled.

The faith healer stood with his hands clasped together before him—a gesture I had heard was called a "mudra." He shifted his hands so that the middle finger on each was pointed upwards, pressed together.

"Sansho kokyu . . . hear my request, great demon-god of the helm-bow peaks. Send your avatar to this place, bind away spirits of evil and malice!"

At first I thought it was another sutra, but then I realized he was speaking Japanese; yet it was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. It was like a spell, or perhaps like he was telling a kind of story. As he chanted his voice grew steadily louder.

"Contain that which hinders the House of Kuonji in this place; rin-byo-to-ja-kai-chin-retsu-zai-zen!"

I recognized the final string of syllables: it was the *kuji*—the "nine characters"—a sort of good luck spell said to ward off evil spirits. Kyogokudo raised his hand like a knife and cut down through the air five times, then four times across.

Then the nature of his chanting changed. Now he was invoking old gods, Buddhist deities—no, older still, Hindu gods brought to our land in the vestments of Buddhism. He invoked their names, calling to the *Fudo Myo-o* to raise the flames, part the waves, lift the mountains, then do it all in reverse, all in reverse—

As he spoke, something happened to Mrs. Kuonji. First she trembled as if she had the ague, then I thought she was going to put a hand to her eyes in pain, but her hand went to her forehead instead. At last she spoke, half screaming, her voice slurred as if her teeth were loose in their sockets. "S-Stop this! Those words..."

Kyogokudo ceased his incantation and stared her down. "Heard them before?"

"Yes, it's—"

"The *Fudo-o* living-spirit exorcism? Similar, but not quite. I'm happy to pluck a bow-string, if you prefer?"

"Wh-What are you doing?" she stammered. Apparently his words had some meaning to her, though they were baffling to me.

"There is an *onmyoji* technique which involves the bow," Kyogokudo said. "To pluck the string is called *meigen*—playing the bird's cry—and to launch a *kaburaya* whistling arrow is called *hikime*—blinking the toad's eye. You know which toad I mean."

Mrs. Kuonji groaned. Ignoring her, Kyogokudo resumed his spell. "*On the other side, blood-flowers will bloom, and dust and decay shall—*"

The lady of the house had reached her limit. "Forgive me! Please forgive me... I only did what my mother did before me!"

"Silence!" It was Ryoko who stood suddenly, but the voice I heard couldn't have been hers. I looked up to see where it had come from and couldn't believe my eyes.

It was Ryoko, but at the same time it was not. Her eyes were wide open and completely rolled up into her head so that no pupils were showing.

"Give it back," she said, her torso twisting in time with Kyogokudo's rhythmic chanting. *No, this wasn't Ryoko. Something was possessing her.* I trembled. She was shouting in a voice I had never heard before.

"Give me back my child!"

I heard a scream—it was Naito. "I don't know what happened! I was just watching. I didn't do anything! Sh-She was the one who asked me to come! If you want to blame s-someone—"

"Silence! Liar! Liars, both of you!" Ryoko—or rather, the woman who had been Ryoko—screamed in a high-pitched voice. "You have ruined that which was most precious to me! I saw it all. I was there. You killed him!"

The woman who had been Ryoko spun around, her lips cursing everyone in the room.

Her tightly bound hair came loose.

The veins in her forehead pulsed.

I felt my heartbeat quicken in sync with hers.

My head filled with white fog.

"You! You killed him!" Her face twisted into a demonic mask, Ryoko launched herself at Naito. Her mother grabbed onto her, trying to hold her back.

Naito grimaced in sheer terror and fell out of his chair onto the floor, pleading, "Ryoko! Ryoko! Please forgive me!"

"Let me go! Murderer!"

Ryoko pushed away her mother, then whirled back to face her sister.

Kyoko didn't move. I realized that her face had gone completely blank.

Her soul was somewhere else, not in our reality.

"You too!"

Ryoko made to attack her sister, but Kyogokudo grabbed her by the nape of the neck from behind.

My heart beat faster than it ever had before, and the world stopped.

"Get back!" Kyogokudo commanded the woman—the thing. "You're not the one we're here for!"

He leaned close to Ryoko and whispered something in her ear.

Abruptly, she stopped struggling.

When she looked around, a faint smile was on her lips.

Ting... I heard a wind chime ring.

"Kwoooooooooork!"

Something screamed—something not human.

It was a bird.

It was Kyoko, screeching as she sat up in bed.

It must have happened in an instant, but everything seemed slowed down.

Like a film in slow motion.

The partitions collapsed to the ground.

Kyoko's breasts were exposed.

Her swollen belly was fully showing.

Then her belly ripped—

Tearing in two.

Something—blood or amniotic fluid, I couldn't tell which—sprayed up toward the ceiling, showering the room.

It soaked the sheets, splattered the cross-shaped fluorescent light, spewed onto the white cloth of the partitions.

I lost my balance, and toppled slowly to the floor.

Warm fluid rained down on me.
I had trouble telling where I ended and the rest of the room began.
The falling partitions were rebounding off the floor.
And beyond them—

A giant fetus rolled out onto the floor.
That's odd.
Why is that newborn baby wearing clothes?
Covered in glistening amniotic fluid—

It's Fujimaki.

She just gave birth to Fujimaki. No—

To Makio Kuonji's corpse.

I saw it clearly, even as my consciousness faded into a haze.
Those familiar-looking thick-rimmed glasses.
An insect crawling along the side of the frame.

That's a daddy longlegs.

I passed out.

6

I'm fleeing through a multi-storied building. Fleeing.

Someone's chasing me. I look back and see my men being killed off one after another. I hold my breath and crouch low, playing dead, as I watch it happen. But I can't see clearly. Maybe my eyes are cloudy.

No, it's dark here. Pitch black.

I grew up in the city. Such complete darkness is new to me. And this landscape is strange, no streetlights, not even the flickering of torches in the night.

A mosquito is flying around... No, not a mosquito. It's some bug I've never seen before. *Watch out, or it'll land on you and stick in its ovipositor and lay a cache of eggs under your skin.*

My platoon's been destroyed—everyone dead, except me and one of my enlisted men. It was probably my fault. At the least, I'm responsible.

What's that sound, that unnerving voice? Is that a bird?

—*The birds cry at night too in the jungle.*

That's what the man said. I can't see his face because it's too dark.

I'll just wait here until it gets light again. I can't tell my left from my right. Try to move, and I might step in a grave, or worse.

—*Stay here till morning and the yanks'll find us. You want to be a P.O.W.? Think of the shame.*

—*You could just end it yourself. Any other platoon captain'd do the same.*

—*It's not death. It's the breaking of jewels.*

The man is talking in his high voice.

Suddenly I realize I'm frightened. I, who spend so much of each day hating life, want only to escape this incoherent existence. I want to die. And I'm scared.

—*You've done something you can't take back.*

—*Can't go back. Gotta go forward.*

The high-pitched voice is talking to me. What was his name? I can't even remember the name of my one surviving man.

Something I can't take back.

That waist, so thin it might snap. That white skin, like a wax figurine's, cool to the touch. And red—the vivid red of fresh blood.

I feel a warm pang of longing...longing for something impossibly fragile that is, once broken, impossible to fix.

I have to hurry. I can't stay in this place too long. No coward worth his salt would.

But where do I go?

There! That square of light is the shrine's torii gate.

But to reach it, I'll have to go through the graveyard.

—*What are you doing?*

I will myself to move, but I can't. My feet trip and tangle beneath me. The blackness is closing in, folding itself around me. I've never been in a place so dark.

No, that's not true. It was this dark that night—that summer night.

"Aaagh!"

My enlisted man—the lone survivor—was peering at me dubiously. There were several other soldiers—*why aren't they all dead?*—sitting behind him. Next to him stood Atsuko Chuzenji.

"Hey you. Wakey-wakey," Kiba—that's his name, Kiba—said in his high voice, and handed me a towel.

"You got a fever or something? You're dripping with sweat. Look, can you talk? I've been waiting for you to come to for quite a while now."

I took Kiba's outstretched hand and sat up. I was in a hospital bed.

"I think I was dreaming of the war. That night when you and I escaped under enemy fire."

I'd woken up so quickly that I still remembered parts of the dream, though I felt that there must have been more. Not that it was a dream, exactly. It was a nightmare.

I asked the time and one of the soldiers—*no, a police officer: Kinoshita*—told me it was eleven o'clock. I grunted in thanks, but it was not until some moments after that that my memory of recent events returned to me in full.

"By eleven you mean at night? Or in the morning?"

"Morning. You've been conked out all night," Kiba informed me.

That's right—

I remembered the instant before I passed out startlingly well. I didn't even have to close my eyes to watch the scene replay in my head with the vividness of a moving picture.

Kyogokudo had been holding a wind chime in his hand—the one that usually hung from the eaves of his house. The partitions had fallen over at just about the same time that Kiba and his men came charging in, with the rescue squad in their white surgical gowns scrambling after them, hauling a stretcher. Naito was screaming his head off and thrashing around violently, so Kinoshita grabbed him from behind and pinned his arms back. Even so, the physician had flailed wildly, trying in vain to escape. Aoki held on to the lady of the house, who sat there wailing incoherently. Kiba was saying something to the director, who stood in a daze, unhearing, all the color drained from his face. And Ryoko, what was Ryoko doing? Kyogokudo, his face sharp and hol-

low, a Grim Reaper if ever there was one, passed in front of me. Through the open doors, I could see Atsuko standing, dumbfounded. Kyogokudo turned and glanced back at me. "Satisfied?" he asked.

As my consciousness dimmed, I searched for Ryoko.

Ryoko was—

She was laughing.

It was all over in the space of a few seconds.

"Everyone who was in that room is so out of it, I can't put together what happened at all. And that just won't do—we have a corpse now, you know. For the sake of convenience, I'm making this room our headquarters. I've called for backup, and forensics has been here since this morning checking the room out. I just wish I had an overview of what's been going on—hell, I'd settle for a vague idea. Was it murder? The abandonment of a corpse? Well—he *was* in the room, I suppose, so technically it's not abandonment."

"What about Kyogokudo?"

"Oh, he evaporated the moment the shit hit the fan." He looked around. "Where did he get to, anyway?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know," Atsuko said, looking squeamish.

"So anyhow, here I am wanting to do some questioning, and there's no one to question—which is why I had to wait for you to get your beauty rest."

I dimly realized that the room in which I had been sleeping was one of the wards in the Kuonji Clinic's new building.

Kiba was still complaining. "The old lady's so worked up she's incoherent; the old man's abed with a fluttering heart. Naito's half-mad, crying, shouting, spewing and dripping—there's no reaching him. The youngest daughter is unconscious, of course; she's in serious condition. She's at another hospital. They're probably in surgery right now."

"And Ryoko?"

What happened to Ryoko?

"Oh, she's fine, relatively speaking. Won't say a word, though. Given the circumstances, I hardly blame her. She's resting in her room. With someone standing guard, of course."

Aoki brought me a cup of water, which I drank greedily. I recalled what Kyogokudo had said: *I doubt your word will be acceptable as evidence, but you will have to testify all the same.*

So that's what he'd meant. Kyogokudo had anticipated this very situation.

"Didn't Kyogokudo tell you what was going to happen? What was your game plan yesterday, anyway, boss?"

"All he said was this: 'there's going to be a corpse. And injuries, probably, so be ready. And someone might try to escape, so catch them.' He used the wind chime as a signal."

"Wait, that was the signal for you to come in? I thought it was some kind

of spell."

"Nonsense. He said the chime would be the easiest thing to hear over the rain. He said he'd leave the door open a touch, too."

I remembered Kyogokudo carefully closing the door before beginning his exorcism. Atsuko must have brought Kiba and his men into the bedroom then; that was how they had been able to respond so quickly.

"That's all we agreed on. He didn't tell me anything more. And besides, when he said there'd be a corpse, I didn't expect it to come rolling out into the middle of the room! No, I'm afraid the whole thing took me by surprise, too."

"But, everything Kyogokudo predicted *did* happen."

We were all silent.

"Well, why don't you start by telling me everything you witnessed in that archive," Kiba said at last, as half-hearted as I'd ever heard him.

"She *gave birth* to the corpse?!" Kiba shouted before I was even finished with my story. He slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard! You sure you weren't daydreaming all this, Sekiguchi?" He stood up forcefully, an officer of the law in full righteous outrage. "You're the first one going to jail if you're yanking my chain here!"

"I'm just telling you what happened as I saw it. Right when Kyogokudo stopped his chanting, her belly split open. And then—and then that corpse came out."

"Th-That's physically impossible! I don't care how big her belly was, you couldn't have stuffed a grown man in there!"

"Well, I guess that's true, though she was a lot bigger than your usual pregnant woman."

"That's not the problem here, really," Atsuko interjected. Her face was pale. "Whether it's physically possible or not, it's certainly not biologically possible—not in our reality, in any case."

"Okay, I know it's hard to imagine. But I saw what I saw. And if it didn't come out of her, then where did it come from? You saw for yourself that there's only one way in and out of that room. And all of us were there. No one could've carried a corpse in past you without you noticing."

"It could have been placed in the room before you got there." Kiba pulled a crumpled cigarette out of his pocket and jammed it in his mouth. He didn't seem to have a match, however, so he just held it there without lighting up.

"But that's impossible, too. First of all, who would do such a thing, and why? And wouldn't we have seen the body as soon as we walked into the room?"

"What if it was hidden somewhere inside?"

"It couldn't have been, not without some kind of elaborate trick. And I

doubt that room could hold the kind of machinery you'd need to make a corpse appear so dramatically, popping up in the middle of the floor like that."

That's right. It had appeared so suddenly, out of thin air. Or, rather...it had been born. Why else would the skin have been covered in glistening fluid like that?

Kiba spoke. "Didn't you say that Kyogoku was complaining about some kind of barrier he had to get through? He could have been talking about some device, right?"

—*There is a barrier here I'll have to deal with.*

Those had been his words.

But in the end, he had revealed the corpse with a spell. What kind of mechanism could be triggered with a spell? I couldn't think of one.

Atsuko put her hand to her jaw—a gesture her brother often used—and began to speak slowly. "Let's suppose what you're telling us is true—as unreasonable as it sounds—and say that through some supernatural means Kyoko was pregnant with her husband. What I want to know is, when did Makio die? When did she become pregnant with him? Was he alive inside her? Or did he die first before going in?"

While she had begun dispassionately enough, as she spoke she seemed to struggle to maintain her calm; by the end her words were spilling out in a rush.

"Sensei, what do you think? Was Makio dead *before* he was born? Or do you think he died *when* he was born?"

"Huh?"

I hadn't considered the possibilities. The moment I'd laid eyes on that thing in the room, I had known it was a corpse. Fujimaki had been born dead—that is, Kyoko had given birth to his corpse. I told Atsuko as much, but the contradiction inherent in giving birth to a grown man's corpse was hard to swallow.

"So, she was concealing a corpse in her belly? I gotta admit, it makes a great hiding place. No finding him in there! But how did they get him inside? Don't tell me it's that magic stuff the tabloid was talking about..."

Kiba was starting to fidget. If Kinoshita had not produced a match and lit his cigarette for him at just that moment, he might well have exploded with frustration.

"Or do you think he was alive when he went in, and died before he came out? The corpse wasn't decayed, mind you. If he died right after he disappeared, he should've been nothing but bones, or at least mummified. No, that was a fresh corpse, whatever else happened to it—which means he was living inside her belly? No way. This is just completely ridiculous. Crazy! Utterly insane!"

Kiba cursed and began fidgeting again.

"Do you know the estimated time of death yet? Or the cause?" Atsuko asked.

"Satomura's doing the autopsy now. He'll let us know when he's done—though it seemed to me he was a little too enthusiastic about the whole thing. I'm sure he'll take his sweet time with it."

As far as Kiba was concerned, Koichi Satomura was the only medical examiner worth going to. He was skilled at what he did, and an affable fellow as well, despite being a bit of a deviant. He liked his work so much he'd skip his dinner to do an autopsy.

Kinoshita picked up a kettle and poured Kiba a cup of tea to quell his boss's fidgeting before it got any worse. I noticed that his own hand on the kettle was trembling.

"D-Detective Kiba, sir. I'm starting to think maybe this isn't our jurisdiction. Shouldn't we leave the vengeful spirits and hauntings and so on to the priests?"

Despite his large frame, the man was clearly shaken to the core.

"Can't you see?" he went on. "This is the dead husband's curse! He possessed the woman's child and made it look like himself! Just like the baby in Kasanegafuchi! He's getting his revenge on his wife and her lover for killing—"

"That's about enough of that!"

Kinoshita had undermined his own efforts to keep Kiba calm, and now the detective did explode.

"We've got a corpse! How is this not our job?! Aoki!"

Aoki looked up in surprise from where he had been standing uncomfortably in the corner of the room. "S-Sir? What is it?"

"Stop gawking like a student caught napping at his desk, and go get me that what's-his-name—that Naito. I want you to go check on Naito. If he can talk, bring him here."

"You going to question him?"

"Just go!!" Kiba barked before collapsing back into his chair.

It was five minutes before Aoki returned. He was followed by two police officers dragging Naito by the arms between them. Naito looked broken, like a crippled man.

"Can you talk?" Kiba asked.

It didn't seem as though Naito had heard him. In response, he merely groaned. Then his eyes went wild and he abruptly began to ramble. "Where's the healer? Call the faith healer in here! I d-didn't do anything! I swear it! I'm scared. Help me! Get rid of this curse!"

*A 17th-century story popularized in the theater about a man who kills his stepdaughter, only to have his next daughter born look exactly like her.

The apprentice doctor, a paragon of rationalism just the day before, had the look of a shattered man whose very identity had fragmented into pieces.

"Calm down! Just answer my questions and I'll get you your prayers, or your exorcism or whatever," Kiba growled. Like a broken puppet, Naito collapsed into a chair and became quiet—a gutter rat lying low to wait out a storm.

Kiba directed Kinoshita to take notes. And just like that, the questioning was underway.

"First of all, I'm going to ask you about last night. I know you've failed a few tests in your day, but surely you can remember that far, hmm? Well? Answer me!"

Naito wasn't the only one in the room who cringed at Kiba's shout. I was sure the other detectives and Atsuko were as jarred by the outburst as I was. We were all badly nerved up.

"First, the body," Kiba went on. "Where did Makio Kuonji's corpse come from?"

"That wasn't Makio! He's alive. He's alive!"

"Sticking to your story, eh? Pretty impressive, seeing as how all of us just saw him dead on the floor! And weren't you carrying on about him haunting you a minute ago? It's ghosts that do haunting, if I'm not mistaken."

"Th-That was no man in that room! Don't be fooled. It's a homunculus! He made it to look just like himself! And then he put it inside Kyoko! Oh, he's evil! A terrible, terrible man—"

"So it's a homo-nomen-whatever! You're saying she gave birth to it? You saw it pop out of her belly?"

"Her belly... Kyoko's belly ripped in two! And that—that thing rolled out on the floor. That homunculus..."

"Did you actually see it come out or not? You didn't, did you? You didn't see that big old dead baby, complete with clothes and glasses, come bursting out of Miss Kuonji's belly. Am I right?"

Atsuko put a hand to her mouth. Kiba's description had been a bit too vivid for her.

But he was on to something.

Come to think of it, I hadn't actually witnessed the body's arrival, either. Maybe everyone there had been too lost in the chaos of the moment to really see what happened. Maybe no one had been looking—

No. We were looking.

We just couldn't see.

The partitions—

The partitions had been in the way!

We only saw *it* after they had fallen to the floor.

The only ones who had seen everything, without the partitions blocking

their view, were Kyogokudo and...

Ryoko.

The door opened suddenly.

"Look at all of you. Still here wasting your time?"

It was Kyogokudo.

In stark contrast to the day before, he was wearing a light, yellow-checked kimono, and he carried a *haori* jacket over one arm.

"Kyogoku! Where have you been?"

"I got some blood on me, so I went home to take a bath; then, after a rest, I took my clothes to be cleaned; and then I went to drag out this shut-in to be a witness. I hardly see how any of that is grounds for your displeasure."

Enokizu was standing behind him.

"Reiji! I was figuring I'd have to call you in sooner or later."

Enokizu's face was puffy, like that of a child just awoken from a nap. He gave a lackadaisical "hey" in greeting. He was dressed like a turn-of-the-century nobleman on his way to a Western ball. I had a momentary sensation that this was all a masquerade, and no one had bothered to let me know until now. Naito, confronted by his two nemeses, shrank down even further in his seat.

The masqueraders walked in and proceeded to sit down in the two empty chairs in the room as naturally as if this had all been pre-arranged.

"Kyogoku. When you walked in you said we were wasting our time. Just what did you mean by that, eh? Think a man disappearing like a puff of smoke from a sealed room, then reappearing—as a corpse—a year and a half later from a woman's womb is a waste of time? Not bizarre enough for you—is that it?"

Kiba stood and began to pace back and forth as he talked. Enokizu followed him with his eyes, a demeaning smirk on his face.

"Now you're talking nonsense along with the rest of them, boss," Kyogokudo said. "Sekiguchi, don't tell me you still can't break the curse after all that drama?"

I turned to the bookseller-priest. "What are you talking about? Break the curse? I thought that was your job. Look, everything happened like you said it would, sure, but the mystery's only gotten deeper."

That, and I had promised to help Ryoko and wound up doing just the opposite.

The family was doomed for sure, with me to blame.

"If you know something, Kyogoku, stop keeping it to yourself and spill the beans. How did Makio disappear? Where was he, when did he die, and how did he come back a corpse? Can you explain all that? And no talk of vengeful ghosts or homo-nucleusey things, now."

Kyogokudo slowly looked us all over, favoring everyone in the room with

his usual sour face. "He didn't 'disappear,' and he didn't go anywhere—

"Fujimaki was there, dead, the whole time."

None of us could comprehend what he had just said. A full thirty seconds of silence passed.

It was Kyogokudo's sister who pieced it together first. "You mean, Makio died in that room on the day of his disappearance—and he'd been left there until yesterday? That's what you mean?"

"Yes, quite."

"But that's—that's impossible!" I shouted. "So many people had been in that room, looking. I'd been in that room, too!"

"Not all that many, actually. We can safely say that the two sisters, Ryoko and Kyoko, and you, Tokizo, and his wife had been in there. As for everyone else, the director surely never got close, the mother might have come up to the doorway but no further, and Dr. Naito over there might have forced the door open, but he was too scared to look inside."

"But Kyogoku, even so, that's five people in there. And yesterday—"

"That's right. Actually, I had hoped yesterday wouldn't turn out quite so dramatically. I would rather Kyoko had not been put through that. I didn't realize the strain on her body was so great."

"So, what exactly were you planning to do?" Atsuko asked. "I was supposed to open the door, and say 'there it is, look.' Then Naito would probably have run, I'd ring my chimes, and the police would stop him. But I hadn't counted on those partitions being up—you couldn't see a thing. So I had to bring them all into the room—but the director and the rest of them were too far gone by that point even to notice."

"Couldn't you have just moved the partitions?"

"That wouldn't have rid Sekiguchi of his curse."

"What are you talking about?!" Kiba's forehead wrinkled in exasperation.

"The Kuonji sisters and Sekiguchi *could not see* that corpse. I merely wanted to make it so they could."

What is he talking about? How could someone not be able to see a corpse? This wasn't magic, or some ninja trick.

—The barrier!

Could there have been some dark, sorcerous barrier shielding the corpse from my sight? Was it a kind of magic?

"Kyogokudo, you mean the barrier you were talking about was affecting me?"

Kyogokudo lifted an eyebrow at me. "The barrier I was talking about was those partitions. They were in my way. That's all."

"But when I first went into the archive there weren't any partitions! And there wasn't any corpse!"

"What are you talking about? There was a corpse," Enokizu said suddenly.

Kiba turned to him. "There was?"

"There was."

I felt dizzy.

"Sekiguchi. You saw that corpse. You just didn't recognize it."

What?

The room began to spin slowly. I felt the world twist around me.

"Your description of this building was very detailed—unusually so. Just by hearing you discuss it, I was able to construct a model of the place in my mind. And when I actually came here I was startled by how accurate you had been. But there was one thing you never clearly described. It was the floor of the archives. You told me everything there was to tell about the doors, the walls and the bookshelves, the ceiling, the stepladder and desk, the bed and sideboard, even the fluorescent lights in the shape of a cross. But the floor you left vague. I had no idea what it was like based on what you said. Yet you can't walk into a large room without noticing the floor. Which meant that consciously or unconsciously, you had seen the floor but were unable to describe it to me. I found that very strange. Then I remembered that you did say something—one thing—concerning the floor of that room."

Kyogokudo pulled his hand out of his pocket and rested it under his chin—his favorite pose, which his sister had imitated just moments before. "You said you saw something shine, like a fruit knife. Why would a fruit knife be left lying on the floor? The answer is, it was no fruit knife. It was the knife sticking into Fujimaki's side."

Aaaah!

I crumbled inside. As if an occult anesthesia had suddenly worn off, I felt the dense murkiness behind my eyes spasm and dissipate with a great torrent of sound.

That's right.

Fujimaki had been there, dead, the whole time!

The corpse wasn't born. It was there. And I *knew* it.

"E-Eno... You mean, when you said—"

"Yeah. I opened the door, and there was a corpse. If it was a snake, it would have bit us. It certainly didn't occur to me that you couldn't see it."

—You really didn't see?

—There's only one thing left we can do, and that's call the police!

Atsuko gasped. "So when I met you outside the building—"

"That's right. When I walked out, you called to me, didn't you, Atsu. But I couldn't hear your voice at all. It sounded like the buzzing of bees, or the whisper of the wind. I can't close my ears, but I sure couldn't hear you. That's when it occurred to me that maybe you could have your eyes open but not see a corpse. That's why I told you to call Kiba."

So only Enokizu had seen it.

It had been there, but not for me.

"Does that sort of thing really happen?" Aoki asked. "I mean, it doesn't seem possible."

"Sure, it's possible. Rare, but possible. As you well know, Sekiguchi, the 'reality' you see, hear, and experience is not reality itself. It's a construct your brain puts together by picking and choosing from what it takes in. When your brain chooses not to accept something, you simply remain unaware of it—and unable to be aware of it. You might have a memory of it somewhere, but it will never enter your conscious mind."

"Ah, the old illusory reality thing. We can't tell if it's really real or not."

I had been living in an illusory reality where there was no corpse. It was like the opposite of seeing a ghost.

"Brain damage can lead to all sorts of fascinating symptoms, like the inability to recognize a person's face, or to understand the concept of the number *five*, exclusively. We all walk around with our private hallucinations, thinking we're living in some kind of reality, when we're really living in the backs of our own heads. What made this particular case so thorny is that there was more than one person who couldn't see the corpse. Worse still, one of them was our supposedly impartial observer—Tatsumi Sekiguchi. If it had been just one person, we could have said 'they're crazy,' and been done with it. All in all, a terrible waste of time."

"What about the old couple, the employees? You said they'd been in the room."

"Oh, they saw the body, for sure. That's probably why they quit—it was all too bizarre for them. They were the ones who carried Kyoko's bed in there. They must have thought her mad to want to sleep next to her husband's corpse."

"So that's why the family paid them all that hush money?"

"I doubt that—after all, the one paying them, Mrs. Kuonji, didn't know about the body, did she?"

"Are you sure?"

"What I think is that the old couple kept mum about Makio out of a sense of obligation after so many generations of service. If the clinic actually paid them to keep quiet, it was about something else."

"What? The missing infants?"

"You can ask them yourself later."

Kiba snorted. "Well, that's all fine, but I'm not buying it. Even assuming such ridiculous things could happen, why would this corpse-blindness affect not only Ryoko and Kyoko, but our witless writer as well? And how could a year-and-a-half-old corpse look fresh enough to be alive? Oh, and what the hell was in Kyoko's belly, anyway?"

"That's right," Atsuko said. "That was not your typical pregnancy, corpse or no."

Kyogokudo frowned impatiently and ran his fingers through his hair. "If you got the big picture, you'd see that all this doesn't really matter. Keep tripping up on this sort of trivia, and I could sit here talking for days and we'd never see the end of it. I'm not here to debate every point; I'm not going to publish a treatise on the thing."

"What I'm missing here is the big picture. Give it to me straight, bookman. What was Kyoko pregnant with? And why did she split open like some kind of melon? That's one thing everybody claims to have seen."

Kyogokudo frowned. "Why must everyone insist on thinking the impossible? Hers was a false pregnancy, of course. Pseudocyesis, it's called. Think about it—no matter how delayed a pregnancy might get, no human placenta is going to last a whole year and a half! It would wither, the fetus would die, and the mother would have a serious medical condition. If you tried to tell me some woman was actually pregnant for twenty months, I'd say either you were crazy, she was suffering some unrelated illness—or it was a false pregnancy. Kyoko's abdomen split because she came back to her senses."

"So there was nothing in her at all?"

"Nothing but hope and regret. And maybe Fujimaki's unrealized dreams," Kyogokudo said, waxing poetic.

"You suspected this from the start, didn't you?" I accused him. "From the moment I first came to you with this story."

"I couldn't have said for certain—didn't have enough information to go on, really—but yes, I suspected. There was also the possibility that she was suffering a pregnancy delusion, of course."

—*Does it ever speak to you from inside your belly?*

"Ah ha. So that's why you asked her those questions—to determine whether she had a false pregnancy or a pregnancy delusion!"

"Hey, Sekiguchi. Don't tell me *you* understand this old coot. What's the difference between something that's false and a delusion?"

"A false pregnancy is a kind of neurosis resulting from a strong desire for a child—the woman actually thinks she is pregnant. And, even though she is not with child, her body reacts as if it were. A pregnancy delusion, on the other hand, is a type of delusory state where the woman believes another life has come into being inside her own body."

"Sounds the same to me."

"This 'other life' doesn't necessarily have to be a baby," Kyogokudo explained. "It could be the second coming, or a previous child lost to a miscarriage, or even an ancestor. There need be no intercourse prior, and the symptoms in the mother's body are slightly different from those associated with a false pregnancy. One of the telltale signs is when the woman believes that the other life inside her is talking to her or giving her orders. It's a bit like the phenomenon of possession, actually. In the case of possession, someone from outside is controlling you—they *become* you, in effect. And there are two ways this can happen: with one variety, your personality is taken over entirely, and with the other you retain your own consciousness even while you are possessed. The latter sort leads the patient to feel they are being controlled from the outside. Pregnancy delusions are rather similar—the main difference is whether the possessing entity comes from outside or from within. Also, delusional pregnancies usually end up worse than false pregnancies. Sometimes an exorcism is required, and with this family's history—"

"*Oshobo* possession!"

"That's right. And, as there was no intercourse—typically an absolute requirement for false pregnancy to occur—between Kyoko and Fujimaki, it worried me even more."

"There wasn't?"

Really?

Kyogokudo didn't answer the question.

"However, when I talked to her, I realized that her condition wasn't much like a pregnancy delusion at all. So I decided that what we were dealing with what was in fact a very special kind of false pregnancy."

"Can someone's body do all that just by imagining it?" Aoki asked.

"I don't think 'imagining' is quite the right word. It's a kind of illusory reality, really. The brain actually sends the wrong signals to the body. It starts with a strong desire, so certainly there is some imagination involved, but it takes much more. In Kyoko's case the circumstances were quite unusual. You see, she didn't necessarily want the baby. She merely wanted to be pregnant and continue being pregnant. Eventually, her body just couldn't bear the strain. I didn't expect stimulating her to create quite the reaction it did—I'm just glad I had the foresight to bring along a medical team." Kyogokudo's eyes darkened. "She must have been at her limit already."

"By 'stimulate' you mean—what exactly did you do to her?" asked his sister.

"I used a kind of regression hypnosis to send her back into her past memories. The tricky thing about false pregnancy isn't the symptoms, it's the heart. Not the beating heart, but the mind, the soul. The heart unconsciously wants something so much that the brain goes along with it, and the two create a feedback loop—like two swindlers conning each other, each making the other

think he knows what's going down when neither of them really does. The more complete the deception, the more satisfied the heart.

"Of course, the brain knows it's all a lie. But the only way to reveal the deception to the one who's suffering from it is to present irrefutable proof to their consciousness. Do this, and the heart is forced to recognize the deception. At this point, the body returns to its normal state very rapidly. There's no longer any need for the deception to continue, after all.

"Now, normally the consciousness puts two and two together after the pregnancy has gone on for ten months or more; but not in Kyoko's case. She wanted to be pregnant for as long as she could—as long as her consciousness would allow. It certainly helped that she went mad along the way. Luckily, it was evident on what day her condition had started, so all I had to do was bring her back to that point and she would see things as they were."

"The day when Makio disappeared—was murdered, I mean?"

"Before that."

"Hold on a second—back to the bit about her wanting to remain pregnant. I'm not sure I understand that. Don't people want to get pregnant so they can have a kid?"

"There are other reasons." He looked at Naito. "She wanted to be pregnant so she would not have to acknowledge what she had done," Kyogokudo said, staring directly at the young physician.

Naito didn't move—not even to blink.

"You mean killing her husband?" Kiba asked, also looking at Naito.

"Not precisely, but ultimately it's the same thing, yes. But her condition wasn't triggered by some unconscious desire for a way to escape her guilt. Rather, it was actually a display of affection. A very twisted expression of love that led to a gruesome means of rectifying her situation."

"Kyoko...loved Makio, didn't she?" Atsuko said quietly.

"You could say that. But in order to make herself believe it, she needed proof. A pregnancy, for example. That's all the condition was to her: evidence of intercourse. What better way to demonstrate the exchange of affections between wife and husband?"

Enokizu snorted. "Of all the obscene—"

Kyogokudo shook his head. "Nothing obscene about it," he interjected. "She sought for proof in sexual intercourse because she thought of it as the ultimate expression of love. She wasn't after some licentious pleasure. Which is why I said it was such an unusual case of false pregnancy, because, in the end, she didn't really want to be pregnant at all, did she? Pregnancy was merely the side effect of the result she desired: proof that they were intimate, that they had shared physical love. Of course it had never happened, but her pregnancy served to alter the past after the fact. Her condition had the effect—for her—of eliminating the whole reason this tragedy came to pass in the first place.

If she really had exchanged affections with her husband, *none of what transpired would have taken place*. For her, birth would have been the end of everything."

"That I don't understand," Kiba said, scratching his neck.

Kyogokudo gazed out the window. "For her husband, Makio, intercourse was only a means to an end: the biological process for generating descendants. He saw the passing on of genetic material as his sole directive as a living being, and the creation of offspring as the ultimate expression of love. For him, birth was the goal, so much so that intercourse for any other purpose was undesirable."

Theirs had been a barren bond, all the more tragic for their good intentions.

"So by having this child in her that was never going to be born, Kyoko was in a way going back to a point before Makio's death to find the happiness she had never known. And she could deny her current reality at the same time," Atsuko reprised, nodding.

"She was in complete denial," her brother agreed. "And the only thing with the power to bring it all crashing down in an instant was Makio's corpse. The reality of her husband's dead body would have dashed all her hopes, past and present. That is why Kyoko couldn't see it. Her pregnancy and the disappearance of the body were two parts of a set piece. For her brain, maintaining ignorance of the corpse was just as important as—no, even more important than—maintaining the illusion of pregnancy."

Kiba groaned.

"Of course, that should have ended as soon as a third party arrived on the scene. However, ironically enough, because she nursed her pregnancy in that room, no one ever came in and discovered the corpse. That's how she managed to maintain her false pregnancy for so long. However, my machinations were enough to present her brain with something it couldn't deny. As soon as it was confronted with the reality I showed her, her body rapidly returned to its natural state, and her belly, already stretched to its limits—"

This time, it was Naito who howled.

"Yet even if I'd done nothing, she wouldn't have lasted much longer—only a few days at most. She had already been under considerable strain if something as simple as regressive hypnosis pushed her over the edge. It deeply saddens me that there was no other way," Kyogokudo lowered his eyes, a look of sincere regret on his face.

"So what's this reality she didn't want to face? What happened? What did she do to this husband she supposedly loved so much?" Kiba glanced at Naito again.

"In the beginning—" Naito stopped, wet his lips, then started anew. "In the beginning, it was she who invited me. Seems crazy, thinking about it now."

The would-be doctor seemed surprisingly calm—the calmest I'd ever seen him. All of the frantic energy he had displayed earlier seemed to have leached out of him.

"I came to the Kuonji house—I think it was the year after the war began, so that's...ten years ago. I... My mother died soon after I was born. I don't know when my father died. My earliest memories are of living on the second floor of a brothel. The couple who raised me, they were the pimps, I guess you'd call them. It was a vulgar life of poverty. But they sent me to school all the same. Why, you ask? That was the condition placed on them by a special person who brought them money every month."

Naito looked up at Kiba. His eyes were bloodshot as always, but without a trace of confusion.

"See, someone else was paying for my upbringing. My step-parents used to tell me all the time that I was the goose who laid golden eggs. I didn't know what they meant back then, of course." He laughed wryly. "Guess where the money came from? Yup, the woman with the big pocketbook who visited that brothel once a month in secret was none other than Mrs. Kuonji."

"You mean the director's wife? She was giving them money to raise you? Why?"

Naito's gaze turned inward as he contemplated some scene from his memory. "She was a real beauty back then. Always so perfectly dressed. All I saw of her was the glimpses I got from hiding, when she made her visits... I used to think how happy I'd be if she were my real mom. Then I started to think that maybe she was my real mom."

He smiled a faint smile. "But of course she wasn't. Apparently, my real mother gave birth in this hospital, then died in some sort of accident. My old man hung himself because of it. My foster parents said the clinic was giving us the money to make it up to me. Funny, eh? Why did the clinic owe me anything? The only reason I can think of is that my mother's death was the result of malpractice, something they wanted covered up. I don't know to this day what happened. Either way, my foster parents had keen noses for the scent of money and so they took me in, claiming I was some distant relative."

Naito took a deep breath. "But when the war started, something happened and the couple at the brothel picked up and left town. I was nineteen. Just like that, they abandoned me, and it was Mrs. Kuonji who came then and talked to me for the first time. Imagine my surprise when she said she would take me in. But she had two conditions: first, I had to claim to be a distant relation of her husband; secondly, I was to marry into the family and become their adopted son. Which is how I traded the smell of sin for the smell of antiseptic here at the clinic."

"And you were supposed to marry into the family?"

"Heh. The director doesn't even know I'm not really related—well, he might've sensed it dimly. I was happy, though. I would have done just about anything, even become a doctor, if it meant getting away from that brothel with its dingy tatami. Of course, there was another reason I was enthusiastic about the deal—you can probably guess. Their daughter." Naito's lips curled into a wry smile and he chuckled.

"You fell in love with Kyoko, then."

"Kyoko? No. No way!" Naito said, mockingly imitating Kiba's rough accent, but still unable to hide a slight tremble in his voice. "It was Ryoko I had it bad for. I was hers the moment I laid eyes on her. But she was cold, real cold. I don't think I've ever seen her smile in front of me, not once. Mrs. Kuonji seemed to keep her at arm's length, too. When I asked about it, she told me that since Ryoko could not bear a child, she would never be married. I was to marry Kyoko."

"What did you think of Kyoko?"

"Oh, she was fine, I suppose. Maybe a little spoiled—you know, pampered—and that didn't sit well with me. I was drawn to Ryoko, with that shadowy side, so quiet, a bit like her mother in some ways. You can imagine, it's practically torture to have to marry the sister of the woman you love and live right alongside her. I hesitated. But things changed after I came back from the war."

"The return of Makio Fujino."

"Exactly. People assumed I was sore about it, like a child whose candy got snatched away from him, but far from it. I was relieved. I figured it was my chance to marry Ryoko!"

"What did Mrs. Kuonji have to say about Makio's proposal? Hadn't she chosen you?"

"Oh, she and the director thought about it for some time; but in the end it's always money that talks. They took a real beating during the war. Mrs. Kuonji came to me, head bowed low, and told me they would take care of me for the rest of my life, even help me find a bride. I told her it was fine, that she should just let me marry Ryoko. But as soon as I said that, her face got all red and she practically shouted 'no.' She said she would honor any request but that one—never that one. I despaired anew."

"Do you know why she objected?"

"No idea. I spent my days aimlessly, waiting for something to happen. I flunked my tests. Eventually, Kyoko married Makio, but I didn't care the least about them. I could hear them talking from my room sometimes, though. It was summer, and the windows were always open."

So the windows *did* have to be open for someone in his apartment to hear people in the other building.

"I think it was about a month after they got married. I overheard a very

strange discussion between them—not that I was trying to hear, mind you.”

“Strange? How so?”

“It was very peculiar. It wasn’t an argument or a fight, exactly. And the first time, it finished almost as soon as it began. It sounded like Kyoko was attacking him, but the cause was always something Makio said. Every time he brought it up, she would fly into a rage. They kept having this conversation, and each time it got worse, with Kyoko’s behavior escalating more and more.”

“Do you know what they were talking about?”

“More or less. It started with him mentioning that Kyoko didn’t seem to remember things from their past. Makio would ask her all kinds of questions, trying to jog her memory. He was always so hesitant, though, that it irritated even me. You know the kind that are always trying to get on your good side, and they constantly apologize, and the more they do it, the more you can’t stand them? He was that kind of guy.”

“So what were these questions he’d ask?”

“Oh, whether she remembered meeting underneath a ginkgo tree on some particular night, or whether she remembered something about a little room in the back of somewhere, that sort of thing.”

The ginkgo must have been the *kosazuke* ginkgo mentioned in Makio’s diary—the place where the couple had their first rendezvous. And the little room in back must have been the sealed room that closed off the rear exit to the archive.

“He brought up all sorts of things. Kyoko didn’t remember a single one of them, and pretty soon, she started treating Makio like he was crazy. When it got to the subject of the love letter, Kyoko’s irritation reached its limit.”

Again, the love letter seemed to be the key.

Naito continued. “He told her he sent a letter, and she said she didn’t know anything about it, and on they went, until I heard a terrific crash. That’s when the violence started—all Kyoko’s doing, of course. It was around the beginning of August. Every night after that, from just after midnight until early dawn, she screeched and screamed at him like a yowling cat in heat.”

“Just after midnight? Why so late?”

“I found out later that Makio had gotten into the habit of working in his laboratory on something every day until precisely midnight. You could set your watch to it. Kyoko didn’t like that much, either. When he returned to the bedroom, that’s when the fighting would start.”

This testimony matched what was written in the diary perfectly. Fujimaki had written that he suspected his wife of some memory impairment, and that his wife’s madness had been his own fault. By madness, he must’ve meant what Naito referred to as the yowling of a cat in heat. It seemed that husband and wife each thought the other was crazy.

“Then, just around the end of August, Kyoko suddenly showed up at my room. ‘You can hear us, can’t you,’ she says to me all quiet-like. ‘Our windows are so close’—but she didn’t seem mad that I had overheard them. No, it was like she was trying to provoke me. She’d put on lots of lipstick. And she batted her eyes at me, all inviting. I wasn’t sure what to do, but in the end I told her what I thought. ‘Miss, aren’t you being a little too hard on him? Your mother will find out sooner or later,’ I told her. Then she starts shouting all of a sudden, telling me it’s her husband who’s the cruel one, he’s the one who’s crazy.”

“Sounds like this Kyoko has a pretty short fuse,” Kiba grunted.

“Not at all. Sure, she was a bit strong-minded. But in other circumstances, you might have called her spirited, or forward-looking. She was a wholesome girl.”

Wholesome? Her? How could that be?

“A wholesome girl,” he repeated. “But what do you think she said to me, the boy raised in a brothel? She told me she was still a virgin.”

No. Something was off. If Kyoko was the good girl Naito claimed she was, her saying that made no sense. Yet, there was an odd discrepancy between the strange girl Naito was describing, and the strange girl I thought I knew.

“Apparently, since getting married, Makio hadn’t laid so much as a finger on his wife. Well, Kyoko needed to talk, and the more she told me—about how he wouldn’t hold her or love her—the more it made me feel dirty—not to mention aroused.”

“Lecher,” Enokizu said.

Naito ignored him and went on. “But even though Makio wouldn’t sleep with his wife, he kept talking about children. Then he’d ask her about things that had happened years ago—all those things she claimed to know nothing about. When she asked why he was so obsessed about the past, he never told her, he just laughed meekly and apologized.”

Of course he did. From Fujimaki’s point of view, Kyoko was the one with the memory impairment, not to mention some kind of developing psychosis. Assuming that his memory—or more accurately, his diary—was correct, it would be hard to imagine any other possibility. And after all, I had delivered the love letter myself. That, and—

That and...

“According to what Kyoko told me, Makio said he sent her a love letter, got a response, had an affair, and in the end—she got pregnant. He wanted to know what happened to the child: did she abort it? Did it die? What a joke! Here’s a husband who won’t even hold his wife’s hand, and we’re to believe he knocked her up and made her get an abortion ten years ago? I started thinking maybe Makio was the one who was strange. From that day on, Kyoko started acting real friendly with me—especially in front of him—like she had it for me bad.”

“What did her husband do?”

"Ah, he was a coward, of course. Pretended he couldn't see what was going on in front of his own eyes. And the more he did that, the braver Kyoko got. Whenever it got too heavy to ignore, he would just chuckle and make himself scarce. You know the sort of people you can't help but pick on? That was Makio. He brought out the bully in her. It's his own fault, really."

"And the director and his wife knew nothing of this?"

"She was real good about that. Makio kept mum about the whole thing for some reason, and Kyoko—in front of her parents, she always played the devoted wife. Too proud to admit anything was wrong, that one. By fall she was inviting me into their bedroom. We would sit there drinking while Makio was in his lab. And every day, at about five minutes after midnight, I'd walk out just as he was coming back."

I imagined Naito and Fujimaki passing each other in the doorway: *The lover, looking contemptuously at the husband. His eyes venomous, like a snake's. The husband looking back, mouth forced into a meek smile. He nods curtly...*

It was a bizarre situation, yet I found I had no trouble imagining it in full detail.

"One day I was visiting her room like always, and there was strong-minded Kyoko, crying. I asked her why, and she said that Makio didn't love her because of her sister. Ryoko had Makio caught in her web—she was the one pulling the strings. I have no way of knowing where she got that idea. She was deeper in her cups with each passing night, until she was practically an alcoholic—she might have just hallucinated the whole thing."

I had heard much the same from Kyoko already. I, too, couldn't see where her suspicions had come from.

"One night Kyoko was pretty drunk, and she laid into her sister something fierce. I don't think there had ever been an unkind word between the two before, so Ryoko was pretty taken aback, as you might imagine. Kyoko accused her sister of being a temptress, a demon with an angel's face who had stolen her husband's soul. And me, hearing her say those things to Ryoko—who was still the object of my affections, after all—well, it got me all worked up. Up until then, everyone had treated Ryoko so gingerly—like a boil not to be touched."

"You are completely warped, you know that?" Enokizu scoffed.

"Call me what you will. Kyoko said her sister was a witch. Then she clung to me. Told me she wanted me."

"And you went ahead?" Enokizu raised a bushy eyebrow and glared at Naito. At some point his puffy just-woke-up look had transformed into one of cold determination. Meanwhile, Naito was quickly reverting to his old wishy-washy self.

"Hey, I was always told that when a woman throws herself at you, you'd best be ready to play catch."

"Idiot. Had you no idea why she might want you in the first place? She was only using you to get Fujimaki's attention. And then she took it too far when it turned out poor Fujimaki hadn't a jealous bone in his body. You could have stopped it! But no, you just blithely did what you were told, didn't you? Have you no pride? You were just a substitute for Makio!"

Enokizu rarely got this excited. Kiba glanced back and forth between the two men, clearly astonished.

"Thanks for the report, Mr. Private Eye, but I don't need you to tell me anything. I knew what I was doing. After all..."—Naito glared back at Enokizu—"after all, I was just using Kyoko as a substitute for her sister!"

Enokizu grimaced like someone opening a bucket of months-old garbage.

"Go ahead, despise me if you like. That's right, Kyoko was just a substitute for Ryoko. The two look so much alike anyway. From that day on, I just pretended Kyoko was her sister. And when she got a taste of what I had to offer, she came back for more. It was thrilling, sure. I mean, her husband was just out the window and across the way.

"After about a month of this, Kyoko said something very strange. She wanted me to turn on the lights and open the curtain. I did as she asked, and boy was I surprised. I never realized you had such a clear view of Makio's laboratory from the bedroom. As long as he was sitting at his desk, he could see everything we were doing. Now, even I thought this was taking it too far, but by then, I didn't really care. I played the lover, as I was asked. It was our little show, with an audience of one. And Kyoko—the whole thing got her very excited."

Was this the unforgivable thing that Kyoko had done to Fujimaki? It would hit hard, to be sure, harder than a cudgel in the ribs. It was difficult to put the impact of his story into words. Enokizu was at a loss for anything to say, when Kiba spoke up.

"You—Makio had nothing to say about it?"

"No. What a crazy. Come to think of it, I think Kyoko and I were a little crazy too. Our show played that night and almost every night afterward. Until I felt about as low as a person can get. To tell the truth, Kyoko was a little bit scary in those days. And Makio did everything he could to act naturally around me during the day. When I thought about what I was doing, with his blessing—I could've spat on him."

"Why was Makio so meek? He had spent ten years and a considerable sum of money winning her—he had even gotten his doctor's license for the sake of her hand. And yet he didn't lay a finger on her?"

"Because he had a reason for not consummating his marriage," said Kogokudo, breaking his silence and rising from his chair.

"Reason? What reason? I can't imagine any reason for not sharing a bed

with your wife, and what's more, letting her share it with someone else."

"Was Makio some kind of masochist? Or maybe he was impotent—"

"No. It's much simpler than that."

Kyogokudo poured himself a cup of tea and tossed it back. He stared at the teacup. "It wasn't the start of the war that brought Makio Fujino back from Germany. The country was unstable, and there had been an accident—and he was wounded. To be more precise, he lost a part of his genitals."

"What?!" Kiba said, his voice jumping an octave. "Makio lost his balls? Well that explains a lot of things! But I guess he never told his wife. Wasn't it a little underhanded of him to still get married?"

"True, but I doubt he saw it that way. To the contrary, he felt compelled to marry her." The teacup still in his hand, Kyogokudo slowly turned around. "As I said before, Makio Fujino regarded raising children as his sacred duty as a living organism, the ultimate objective of a person's life."

"In the course of all these events, I happened to have the opportunity to read his mother's journal. I think you'll find that the final words she wrote in that journal—the last words she wrote anywhere—were quite an influence on his worldview."

Kyogokudo's eyes turned slightly upward and he began to recite from memory.

"...In the course of a person's life, it is most important that they bear children, and raise them well. For me to leave this work half-done is a sadness greater than any other, and fills me with regret. I'm not afraid to die. But it pains me to leave you behind before I have had a chance to watch you grow into a man. Makio, you lost your father and now you will lose your mother. Yet you are gentle, and wise, and I know you will grow strong. I do not wish you to know such sadness as I have known. You will find a good companion, and cherish one another, and have children, and lead a full life. This I believe..."

The contrast between this outpouring of motherly love and the ignoble, immoral story we'd just heard from Naito was stark enough to silence the entire room.

"He opened the diary to this page so many times it creased the binding, and read it so often, the letters faded. His mother represented something sacred, the object of an almost religious devotion. To him, this diary was like the Bible is to a Christian or the Koran to a Muslim. He responded to her teachings with his unique methodological rigor, following them to the word so that he might live a pure, righteous, and moral life."

"You're painting us a very pretty picture but I'm afraid that's not going to cut it, Kyogoku. Sure, I understand that Makio couldn't sleep with his wife even if he wanted to. But that still doesn't explain the rest of his unnatural behavior—I don't care how proper or refined he might have been."

"Just listen. As I said, he was religious in his devotion to his mother; none-

theless he did cast aside her teachings once, and only once, twelve years ago. He met Kyoko, and fell in love. Everything had been fine up until that point. But then he let his feelings—his passion, that is—get the better of him, and he committed an immoral act. While he was still only a student, he lay with the young maiden—and got her pregnant."

What?

"Wait a second. Kyoko insists she knows nothing about this affair! How can you be sure that any of that story is true? He could have just made it all up and then written it down. It could be one of these illusory reality things you keep yammering about."

"It could be, and that wouldn't change the argument. The point here is that Fujimaki thought it was the truth, regardless. And anyhow, it *did* actually happen."

"So Kyoko's lying? Or she really has amnesia?"

"Let's focus on Fujimaki for now, shall we? For him, the pregnancy and subsequent abortion were like a nightmare—more an affront to his personal religion than a Muslim having a glass of wine with his pork. To give life to a child and then kill it was a crime worthy of stoning. He wanted to take responsibility for the child before it was too late—he *had to*. Yet that never came to pass."

"His proposal was rejected."

"Exactly. But he didn't give up, and since his mother wanted him to live a full life, atoning through suicide wasn't an option. He probably never even considered it. He was going to do things the right way, even if it took him years; and it did. He decided he would go overseas to study, come back and become a doctor, and marry Kyoko. If the child were still alive, he would recognize it as his own. If there had been an abortion, he would have another child with Kyoko to replace the first. He was filled with this powerful desire to atone for what he'd done, to Kyoko, to the Kuonjis, and of course to his saintly mother. But then something terribly unfortunate and unexpected happened. He was injured, and as a result, he lost his reproductive capability—the only conceivable means he possessed to atone for his past transgression."

"The poor sod."

"He returned home in defeat—but not in despair. From that point on, Makio Fujino began to change. His mother's teachings, so full of charity and love, gradually shifted in his mind, twisting until they could fill the spaces of his tormented heart."

"How so?"

"If the production of offspring is the goal of any human's life—no, of any organism's—then intercourse is merely a means to that end. The process by which one reaches the ultimate goal is irrelevant. In time, his mother's message of love was turned on its head. He came to the conclusion that as long as

you could make a child—even without intercourse—it was sufficient.”

“But you can’t do that! Can you?”

Atsuko spoke up. “But there are so many couples that live happy lives without having children. And adoption was always a possibility, wasn’t it?”

“That’s where Fujimaki was different from your typical person—he would never have been able to accept a child who didn’t bear his genes—or more to the point, his mother’s genes. Furthermore, if he was to marry, he could think of no one other than Kyoko, the girl whom he had wronged. Where he was most mistaken was that he not only believed his way of thinking was right, he actually thought everyone else felt the same way too. Of course Kyoko would have the same objective in life: to bear a child with her own genes. What else *would* someone want? He completely forgot about his mother’s directive to love and to cherish—or rather, he didn’t understand it in the first place.

“There is no hope of rational communication in these sorts of circumstances. To his eyes, his wife’s immoral actions were nothing more than an expression of her desire for a child.”

“What, so he saw Naito and Kyoko carrying on and thought ‘wow, my wife really wants a child, doesn’t she?’”

“Precisely. Emotionally, he was miles away from the anger and jealousy she expected—no, demanded—of him, and she cursed him for it. She hit him, dallied with Naito in front of him, and all of it merely spurred him on in his research. The more Kyoko wanted him to pay attention to her, the more he buried himself in his laboratory.”

“And his research?”

“Why, he was researching a way to make babies without intercourse, of course.”

“Is that really possible?” Kiba asked, looking astonished.

“Well, in his own way, he was a genius.”

“You mean he actually figured out a way to—”

“He was trying to develop a method for in-vitro fertilization.”

“What’s that?”

“Isn’t that the thing they were working on at Keio University?”

“That is artificial insemination, actually. And it didn’t suit his purposes. You see, though he had lost much of his genitalia, he could still produce a small quantity of sperm. But the amount was so small that there was no hope of its withstanding the rigors of artificial insemination. So he made a gamble against incredible odds. He wanted to raise the chances of a single sperm reaching the ovary to one hundred percent. In other words, he was trying to find a way to fertilize a harvested egg with sperm not in the womb, but in the beakers and test tubes on his desk.”

“What! He really *was* making a homunculus? You mean Naito was right?” I shouted.

It was demonic. Unthinkable.

“There are as many moral systems as there are people, Sekiguchi. What one nation or religion considers sacrosanct, another doesn’t care one whit about. How can you censure what he was doing—which was, in effect, the creation of life? Is that not the most sacred of all things? Why should the wheres and hows of a life determine its value? If you are so opposed to going against the natural order of things, should we then, at the other end of the timeline, prevent doctors from prolonging life?”

“Well, you can say what you like, but is what Fujimaki was trying to do even possible? It sounds more like a mad dream to me.”

“It’s possible, in theory. I read through all of his research notes that I had at my disposal, and found his work to be logically sound throughout. Speaking from a purely scientific standpoint, his investigations were of great value. He should have been lauded for making so much progress essentially alone. However...”

Here, Kyogokudo hesitated, and a pained expression came over his face. “He was wrong. Had he been an average man, lacking the skills and the talent to do such great work—if in-vitro fertilization had been nothing more than a delusion, then none of the horror that has since transpired would have come to pass. And yet it did. He completed his research on a misty night, the eighth of January, 1951.”

“He came back to his room a whole half-hour early,” said Naito, picking up where Kyogokudo’s story left off. “It was a particularly cold day... Even with the holidays, Makio’s pattern hadn’t changed one bit. And Kyoko and I just drowned ourselves in liquor and continued our dissolute, despicable affair. We were at it again that day, as lewdly as ever. There wasn’t a fire in the room and it was freezing in there. I remember it clearly. The door opened suddenly. I was lying face up on the bed and Kyoko was astride me, with nary a stitch on. I let my head drop backwards off the edge of the mattress until I could see him, upside down, standing in the doorway.”

Fujimaki was smiling.

The reality behind Naito’s words was so sordidly vivid that I could close my eyes and watch the scene unfold in my imagination as he talked.

—*Kyoko, I’ve done it! My research is complete! We can be happy now!*

—*We can be happy? Is that what a husband says to his wife when he catches her with another man? Do you have no idea what I’m doing right now?*

Kyoko is glaring at her husband, her legs still entwined around Naito where he lies beneath her.

Fujimaki’s still smiling.

—*Of course I know, darling. But it’s okay now. You don’t have to do that anymore!*

—*I don’t have to... Are you insane? Oh, or do you want me now? Are you going to pull me off my lover and actually hold me? Ridiculous! I’d rather die than be held by a cowardly*

maggot like you.

—It's not like that, Kyoko, please don't be angry. All I'm saying is we can have a child without doing that now! Our child, yours and mine. A child to replace the one who died—

—You're crazy, crazy!

"I remember her face up there, above me. She had a faraway look like—what was it you said," he glanced at Enokizu, "like she was staring at something not of this world. She certainly couldn't see me anymore. She was standing above me on the bed now, stark naked."

—I never had your child, and I never will! Who would? Wipe that smile off your face! You should be angry. Furious. But you can't even get mad, can you! Worm!

—Just calm down. Calm down, please. I've been so terrible to you, and I'm sorry. Please, just listen. I-if not now then later, when you've had time to settle—

—Be quiet! Get out! Go to hell!

"Kyoko started picking up whatever she could lay her hands on and throwing it at Makio. I cowered down and rolled off the bed, grabbed my clothes and tried to escape."

—Please, don't be like this. Not in front of Naito.

"That's about when I realized he really did have absolutely no idea what was going on. I mean, I wasn't some bystander to a marital spat—I was his wife's lover caught in the act! Then he started talking to me, still ducking the hail of household objects."

—Naito, I'm sorry about everything. As you can see, my wife's not herself right now. If you went back to your room perhaps we could talk later.

"Kyoko just stood there for a moment, flabbergasted. Then she got even madder than before. I tried to get out of there as quick as I could, but a table clock hit me in the leg and I stumbled. I crawled along the wall trying to get away—"

"And slumped down beneath the oil painting," said Enokizu. His vision had been correct.

"She was like—like a demon. But Makio, he scared me even more. He just stood there, apologizing, that silly smile on his face."

—Please, forgive me. I've been wrong. I let myself get carried away, and I hurt you because of it. I am so sorry. But all that's okay now. I'm not a student anymore. I'm a doctor—the successor to the Kuonji family line. Your father's recognized me. And the child will be born again, ten years later; our child—

—I don't know what you're talking about! Get out of here!

—Stop. Please, Kyoko!

"By that point, I think he'd realized he was in danger. He cut in front of me, dodging another one of her attacks, and tried to flee into the archives."

"So that's why Makio went in there."

"That's right. But that door, it's pretty heavy. He couldn't get it open quick enough. And just as he was grabbing on to it he said something he shouldn't

have."

—Please, just go back to being the girl you were. The girl I knew ten years ago—

"The next moment, everything went red. I didn't know what was going on at first. I saw a pool of blood spreading on the floor, and that's when I saw the fruit knife. Kyoko must have got him as he struggled with the door. The blood was gushing everywhere. She must have hit an artery or something."

—Why, Kyoko? Why?

And like that, the missing moments crept luridly into view.

"So Makio closed the door to stop her from attacking him—and that's why he locked it."

"Right. I heard the latch click into place. I think the pain must have finally drilled it into him that there was no going back. He must've been awfully frightened to lock the door like that."

No, that's not right.

I felt my mind slowly falling into sync with Makio Fujino's train of thought.

He felt fear, yes. Pain. And then, sadness. No—probably more surprise than sadness. But he didn't lock the door because he was afraid.

There is still a way things can be put right. There is still hope. I just have to wait for Kyoko to calm down.

—Everything's fading. No, not yet.

—My mother, she wanted—she wanted me to—

Find a good companion—

Raise a child—

Love and cherish—

Lead a full life—

I believe—

Fujimaki became a giant fetus, awakening again, slowly.

—Where is this place? What am I doing? I...

He lay there, floating in his thoughts, soaking in a warm, amniotic pool of blood, a fruit knife for an umbilical cord: a fetus that would never know life, dreaming of...what? Maybe of the happy future with Kyoko that never came, maybe of the distant past with his mother that would never return. It was the same either way. Our future is just a past yet to arrive, our past a future come and gone.

The blood drained. His body temperature dropped.

—Now I feel...it's getting colder.

Slipping in and out of consciousness.

—It's dark. Quiet. I hear a voice. Is she still angry?

—*Or is she crying?*

And then he saw something.

—*Mother?*

His mother.

“So I was sitting there, beneath the painting.”

Naito's voice dragged me away from Makio Fujino on the brink of death, back to Tatsumi Sekiguchi. Back to myself.

“So I was sitting there, beneath the painting, mouth hanging open like an imbecile. Kyoko gave this screech like some kind of bird or something, and then everything was quiet. Five, ten minutes passed—maybe more. She was just standing there in a daze in front of the door. I forced my limbs to move—I was shaking all over—and picked up my clothes from the floor and ran back to my own room, still naked. I was half-frozen, shivering with the cold—or maybe I was just terrified. I started thinking about what came next. Was he dead now? I didn't want to be an accessory to murder. I considered calling the cops, or even just telling the director about everything, but neither idea seemed like a real option. Makio could have still been alive, after all. And if he was alive, my affair with Kyoko would come out. I'd be dragged through the mud for sure—hell, I might even be charged with attempted murder. Either way, I'd be kicked out on the street.”

Enokizu slapped the armrest of his chair. “I can't believe that you were still thinking of yourself! What about saving a life? You should have apprehended Kyoko, calmed her down, and helped Fujimaki!”

“Okay, so I didn't think of that!” Naito roared back, his eyes flaring. The man's vitality wasn't to be underestimated. Now that everything had been laid out in the open, it was as if a plug had been removed from the bottle that had kept his emotions contained for so long. Perhaps when it had all spewed out he would regain some sense of peace.

“There was no way I wanted to go back to living like I had, in miserable poverty. This clinic might be on the ebb now, but it still has its land and buildings. If I kept quiet they'd make me a doctor eventually, and I'd find a wife and live out my days in reasonable comfort. I wasn't about to go sulking back to the brothel—no way.

“As I sat there thinking about my options, morning came before I knew it. It was perfectly quiet outside; nothing stirred. After a while, I couldn't stay in my room any longer, so I went to see Kyoko. The bed had been made. Kyoko was still standing in front of the door, but she was dressed now. When she noticed me, she immediately told me that Makio had gone into the back room and not come out. She couldn't open the door—it was locked. She asked me if I would help her.”

“She acted as if she had forgotten everything?”

“Not only that—it seemed like she had completely forgotten about *us* as well. I couldn't believe it, but of course, I realized that this might be my lucky break. Nobody else knew about us, I was sure. If there were rumors we could just ignore them. The problem was Makio. If, as unlikely as it seemed now, he were still alive, everything would be ruined. How fortunate that the room he was in was locked from the inside. That meant no one could go in. Leave him in there, and he'd die for sure. And if he was found dead in a room locked from the inside, that has to be suicide, doesn't it? I'm not one for mystery novels, so I'd never heard of this 'sealed-room murder scenario' thing. But it occurred to me that I would need a witness to testify that the room was indeed locked. I made Kyoko go get her father, figuring it would be weird for me to go, and I went back to my room.”

“But the director didn't come, did he?”

“That's right. I waited until a little after noon and then went back, and at that point Tomiko showed up and started making a big fuss. Kyoko told her she had fought with Makio and said she had acted terribly, but she made no mention of us. I counted my blessings—though it was still a bit of a gamble as to whether he was still alive or not—and I called Tokizo to help me open the door. But Tokizo was taking forever, so I broke the hinges myself. The door was still so sturdy, though, that I could only get it open partway. As soon as I did, Kyoko pushed past me and went into the room herself.”

—*He's gone! Makio's gone! He's vanished!*

“Now that I think back on it, I remember her eyes darting around the room, like she was looking for a butterfly—as if she might find Makio floating around in the air somewhere.” Naito stared at Kyogokudo. “You said I was too scared to look in, faith healer, but you were wrong. I *did* look in that room. Sure, I was scared, but I had to know for sure. The funny thing was, I couldn't see him either! After hearing Kyoko say he was gone, I guess I suffered the same delusion she had. Pretty crazy, huh? To think of all the worry it would have saved me if I'd just looked down—but I didn't, and it scared the wits out of me to think he was missing. If he'd gotten out, that meant he was still alive. My affair would be public knowledge. And that's not all—”

“Revenge?”

“I knew he'd come for me. Who wouldn't? If I were him, I wouldn't have stopped until I'd ripped her lover limb from limb and shoved him down the outhouse hole. Until yesterday it scared me even to go into the bath by myself. I couldn't sleep at night; everything I ate tasted like sawdust. But he was—he is dead.” Naito chuckled. “After all that...”

Naito began to laugh. It was Kyogokudo who stopped him.

“Mr. Naito. Who fixed the door and ordered the bed to be brought in there?”

Naito's laugh stopped abruptly, and he thought a moment before replying.

"That's right. Kyoko was wailing about Makio being gone, and Tokizo and I couldn't do anything with her, so we decided to go get the director and his wife. But that's when Ryoko showed up. It was Ryoko."

Ryoko? Ryoko was there?

"Yeah. I remember her turning to Kyoko and asking her what she'd done, telling her to repent if she'd done anything bad or her marriage would never turn happy—something like that. I was worried at first because, from the way she was talking, it sounded like she knew something about us. But then Kyoko had been raving on that she'd had a fight with Makio, and acted horribly, so I realized that's what Ryoko was referring to, not the affair. After that, Ryoko had Tokizo fix the door right away."

"Do you remember what Ryoko looked like?"

"What she looked like?"

"For instance, what was she wearing?"

"Oh, a kimono I guess."

"What about her expression? Did she seem upset, or weary?"

"No, not really. She seemed unusually alert, actually—all business. I remember Tokizo asking if it was really a good idea to call in a carpenter. Ryoko told him that he'd broken the door so he should fix it himself—no one else was to be allowed inside. Tokizo had this weird look on his face, which I suppose makes sense if you figure he'd just seen the corpse..."

"And the bed?"

"Well, Kyoko passed out pretty soon after that. I carried her to the main building to rest up and explained what had happened to the director and his wife. Kyoko stayed in bed in the main building for two or three days. Clearly something was wrong with her. That's when the director examined her and determined that she was three months pregnant."

"So the director's a quack!" Kiba said.

Kyogokudo chuckled dryly. "It's difficult to make an accurate assessment so early in a pregnancy. Especially when the woman tells you she's missed her period. And the body shows the same symptoms as a real pregnancy."

"It's true. I may have failed that test, but I do know a thing or two about medicine, and when I heard what the director had to say, I thought she was pregnant too. His wife was furious, of course. She told her to abort it, how could she bear the child of a man who would up and vanish like that? Of course, I was pretty torn about the whole thing. I was sure the child in her belly was mine. But Kyoko said she wouldn't hear of an abortion."

"This left me in a pickle. Kyoko had completely forgotten about her relationship with me, so there was that, but how could she possibly have had a child with Makio? Did she really believe he'd gotten her pregnant? Still, I figured that, knowing her mother, no matter how much Kyoko protested, the child—my child—would never see the light of day. So what did I care? It

would be illegitimate anyway.

"But then things changed. Ryoko said she should have the child. And wonder of wonders, her hard-as-nails mother suddenly went soft. From then on, the old lady kept a low profile, though I knew her opinion hadn't changed. It was Ryoko who moved Kyoko into the archive room. After that, the mother didn't say anything. It was like she had given silent approval, by that point."

"Sekiguchi, it was Ryoko who had the bed moved into the archives!" Kyogokudo turned to me. "Remember how she said that she had lost all memory from January eighth to the middle of the night on the ninth?"

"Yes, but—"

"Which means she gave the order to fix that door before she came back to her senses," Kyogokudo said, smiling happily for the first time in a long while.

Naito crossed his legs and sat thinking for a while, then a slow grin spread across his face. "Detective, am I guilty of a crime? You heard the story. I didn't do a thing. How's the law going to handle me?"

I had never seen someone look as despicable as Naito did just then.

Kiba thought for a while, a scowl on his lips. "Well," he said at length, "it would be pretty easy to arrest you and put you on trial from what I've just heard. You're guilty enough, that's for sure, and there are charges that would stick. But I'm afraid I don't think I could get the death sentence, so what's the point? That, and frankly, I don't care to see your face ever again. Once I'm sure of your testimony, I'd much rather see you disappear and never come back."

Naito grinned more broadly. "I knew it! I didn't want to hang out in this dank place anyway. Goodbye, clinic. At this point, I'd rather go back to the brothel."

"Ah!" Enokizu shouted, slamming his fist on the table edge. "I don't believe you! How can you live like you do? No, don't answer that, I don't want to know. Maybe the law can't hold you accountable, but you're the worst sort of man there is! You make me want toretch!"

"What do you know about how I feel?!" Naito shouted back.

He was right. How could Enokizu know? The stalk of bamboo growing straight toward the heavens knows nothing of the moss that creeps along the ground. I looked away from the disdain in Enokizu's eyes.

Naito laughed heartily. Enokizu shot up from his chair and for a moment I thought he might strangle the man, but Kiba quickly barked an order and his officers grabbed Naito and escorted him from the room.

"Oh, Mr. Naito?" Kyogokudo called out and the policemen paused at the exit. Naito twisted around in their grasp to peer back over his shoulder. "You can feel him there, stuck on your back, can't you?" the faith healer said in a clear voice. "You won't be rid of Makio Kuonji for some time. I'd be careful, if I were you."

Naito went rigid in an instant, his face a mask of fear. He stumbled as he was shoved through the doorway. He tried to shout something, but one of the officers closed the door before we heard what he was going to say.

"What was that just now?"

"Well, I saw that neither you nor our private eye here much liked the thought of letting him go. So I thought if the law couldn't punish him, maybe I would. Sekiguchi, that is what they call a curse. To the extent that he does not utterly repent, he will bear the weight of Fujimaki upon his soul till his dying day."

I could imagine no harsher punishment for the creeping moss. Of course, I also saw that, ultimately, the punishment was his to accept or reject. If he did suffer, it would be because he had sown those seeds himself.

"When you curse another, you dig two holes." Kyogokudo said. "It's not something I do lightly."

"What's all this then?" Koichi Satomura came in just after Naito had been taken away, his cheerful demeanor almost jarring after the scene we had just witnessed. "I've never heard of a questioning with so many civilians present. Heads will fly if this gets to the brass. You sure about this, Kiba?" Satomura ran his fingers through the lonely hair that clung to the top of his skull behind his bald forehead. His whole face was a smile. He was one of those men who always seem delighted, whose happiness never ceases.

"Not your concern, doc. Get on with your report, why don't you, so you can get back to cutting up corpses, eh? Pervert."

Kiba's language could make ladies blush when he was in a foul mood. But Satomura started in as if nothing were amiss, his eyes all a-twinkle. He began with a friendly hello to Enokizu and Kyogokudo, then to Atsuko and myself.

"So then, about those incomparably beautiful remains you so generously left with me. I would have to say that the latest that man could possibly have died was at least eighteen months ago, if not longer."

"A year and a half? Seriously?"

"Yes. This is just a guess based on what I've heard about the case, but I would say there's a pretty high probability that the victim died on the day he was said to have disappeared, that is, January 9, 1951. There are hardly any signs that the corpse was moved after death, you see."

"Right—" Kiba began, then stopped, a sour expression on his face. It was that crestfallen look people get when they have to accept an unacceptable reality.

"But what a remarkably well preserved wax-mummy!" Satomura continued. "I got more excited than that time I got to autopsy a self-made mummy in Dewa."

A wax mummy?

"You mean that's why he looked so fresh?" I asked.

Kiba stared suspiciously at the examiner. "What, they covered him with wax or something?"

"No, no. Wax-mummification occurs when the corpse saponifies—the fatty tissues themselves undergo a chemical transformation, becoming wax-like. Still, I've never seen one so pristine. Almost all the skin and bones had turned to wax. Of course, the lungs flaked apart like dry leaves, but the heart, liver and kidneys, even the intestinal membrane were all there. Pretty incredible, especially considering the very specific conditions you need to produce a wax-mummy like that. Quite a valuable find!"

"Conditions? What kind of conditions?"

"Well, a wax-mummy is only created when the right chemical processes can occur in the body fat. It doesn't just happen overnight. First, the subcutaneous fat and the fat around the organs sinks; then, when the neutral lipids liquefy, the unsaturated lipids turn into other substances, such as stearin and palmitin. Then—"

"The conditions, please. Not a chemistry lecture."

"Er, right." Satomura squinted behind his thick lenses and favored us all with another smile. "First, temperatures have to be very low. And you need humidity. Now, if it's hot and humid, the corpse will putrefy. Conversely, if it's too dry, it will desiccate and you'll wind up with a regular mummy. That's why most wax-mummies are found in swamps. In fact, almost all are found submerged in water at low temperatures. Considering the local climate here, it's pretty unlikely that any corpse left in a room would ever become a wax-mummy." The doctor was thinking out loud.

"The airtight nature of the room must have helped. You need an anaerobic environment, you see—that's why, yes, that smell of disinfectant in the room—maybe some reaction generated a large amount of carbon dioxide, which is heavier than the air we're breathing and could have pooled on the bottom of the floor. I'm not a chemist so don't ask me how that happened. And it was rather cold in that room; it still is now, even now in the middle of the summer. And he died in the middle of the winter. So maybe he froze at first. They've uncovered wax-mummies in glaciers, too, frozen solid. He also lost most of his blood. All I can say at this stage is that a lot of conditions happened to coincide perfectly. I'm no statistician, but I'd say you're looking at chances close to zero. It's simply amazing."

Satomura looked for all the world like an old man beaming over a favorite grandson.

"Actually," Kyogoku added, "all the buildings in the clinic, including the new one, are perfect for making wax-mummies. One has to wonder about the architect's state of mind. Everything was designed to keep temperatures low

and maintain airtight conditions. Obsessively so."

"Which explains why the rat was mummified, too. So it did have something to do with the case! I *was* right, wasn't I?" Enokizu exclaimed, grinning like a child.

"Rat?" Atsuko said, remembering out loud. "You mean the one in the laboratory? So it must have died right after Makio did."

"Are you saying you have a wax-mummy of a mouse? That I'd like to see!" Satomura was practically salivating.

It occurred to me that, in terms of eccentricity, Enokizu and Satomura were birds of a feather.

"Who cares about a stupid rat! Get on with your report!"

"Right... Well, I also found traces of formalin sprinkled on the body."

"The disinfectant?"

"Yes. But it's not very effective sprinkled on in such light quantities. It'd evaporate right away."

"Maybe the person putting it on didn't know that."

"No," Kyogokudo said suddenly. "It was a spell."

"That's your department, Chuzenji. My specialty is autopsies, which brings me to the cause of death—"

"Which was blood loss, right? We've heard everything you have to say, you can go home now," Kiba grumbled.

"Actually, it wasn't," Satomura said simply. "Cause of death was a cranial fracture. His skull was crushed."

"What?" Kiba and Atsuko exclaimed at the same time.

"Maybe one of the objects Kyoko threw at him?"

"I don't think it was that."

"All right, Dr. Satomura. The victim gets stabbed in the side, runs into the room under his own strength, where he collapses and hits his head. Was that it?"

"That wasn't it either. If the victim was stabbed in the side, here..."—he indicated on his own body where the knife had gone into Makio—"he would be in a lot of pain, and probably on the verge of losing consciousness almost immediately. I expect he would have curled up in a ball, and just sort of toppled over."

Satomura acted out the scene for us. He fell on the floor, clutching his side, curled up in a fetal position.

"The weapon's sticking out of him here, so he'd lie like this, right? I don't think he'd have the strength to get back up after that, either. So, while he's lying there, somebody comes up and drops something heavy—a blunt instrument—on his head. Crack. There's your cause of death."

Nobody spoke for some time as they replayed the scene in their heads. As usual, it was Atsuko who broke the silence.

"Wait, but that means—are you sure the injury didn't take place after death?"

"It didn't."

"After he was stabbed, assuming he received no medical attention, how long would it have taken for him to bleed to death?"

"Well, she got him in a bad spot. I'd say fifteen minutes to half an hour."

"So you mean to say that *after* Fujimaki was stabbed, but *before* he died, someone went into that sealed room and finished him off?"

"That seems to be the case."

"Wait a second, Satomura. That's impossible. It didn't happen!"

"Look, that's not my department. I'm just a doctor, remember?"

Enokizu abruptly burst into laughter.

The entire room turned to him in astonishment.

"This is too rich! We finally got our run-of-the-mill sealed-room murder case!"

It was decided that Kiba would question the director and his wife together. As I had never been trained in interrogation techniques, I didn't know that most questioning is done individually; Kiba argued with his underlings at considerable length about the departure from procedure. However, it was Kyogokudo's suggestion that they confront the two simultaneously, and given the unusual circumstances, the police decided to go ahead with it.

The couple were called to sit side by side in front of Kiba.

The detective sat a while in thought, then his head jerked up suddenly. "What the hell is going on here!" he shouted. "You claim you had no idea there was a corpse in that room?"

"We did not," Mrs. Kuonji said, her voice slack. "We both believed Makio was alive. And we were too afraid to go near the room to find out the truth."

"Afraid? That's odd. Who doesn't visit their pregnant daughter for an entire year and a half? You too?" he glared at the director.

"It's as you say. Maybe I don't deserve to be a father. If you're asking whether I knew about the body—I had my suspicions. One plus one is always two. You can't leave a room without first opening the door. So either he opened the door and left, or he never left it at all. No matter which, it was bad news. Either my daughter or my son-in-law would be guilty. So I—"

"Ignored the whole thing and went about your work. But, Dr. Kuonji, just how long did you think you could keep that going? I've never heard of a more poorly concealed corpse!"

"Yes, but—" the old man began; then his mouth shut and he thought a while before speaking again. "It was a crude affair, like you say. I never expected it to go undiscovered. But if it was going to be out in the open before long anyhow, why go out of my way trying to fix things just to prolong the

end? To tell the truth, I was tired. Tired of fixing this family, of keeping the Kuonji name above the floodwaters. I tired of it a decade ago."

Kiba sat silently, dumbfounded.

Kyogokudo cleared his throat. "Detective Kiba. There are several things I would like to ask these two. I cannot guarantee they will be directly related to the case at hand, but since you seem to be out of questions anyway, perhaps I might continue? That is, if a civilian such as myself might be allowed to speak in these proceedings."

"Allowed? Do what you want. I'm at a loss here," Kiba said, looking around as if he truly were lost.

Kyogokudo turned to the elderly couple. "My first question is for you, Mrs. Kuonji. I see no point in concealing it anymore, so I'll be blunt: is it true the Kuonji household has a history of possession—or at least, that you were so treated back in Sanuki?"

"Yes. I'm sure you think it old-fashioned and ridiculous, but my family was persecuted for years because of those beliefs. Both I and my mother were born here in Tokyo, but I was told that my grandmother had a very rough time of it in Sanuki."

"I see. Yet, there is one thing that does not sit well with me. Your name, Kuonji, seems quite old—am I right in assuming your family history goes back a long time?"

Mrs. Kuonji sighed and did not reply.

"One of the dominant folk-sciences of the Heian period was that of *onmyodo*. Though the practice of *onmyodo* was subsequently banned, when its adherents dispersed from the cities, it spilled across the countryside, fusing with various local traditions and continuing on to this day. For one reason or another, the form that remains in Shikoku is one of the oldest, and closest to the original practice. It occurred to me that the Kuonji family might very well come from a line of practitioners of the old *onmyodo*. Last night, I used esoteric Buddhist and Shinto charms, and a Shingon Buddhist spell, and none of these elicited the slightest reaction from you. Yet when I chanted ceremonial words used by one of the old schools of *onmyodo* that still practice in Shikoku, your reaction was immediate. You knew the words. Am I right?"

"It's true. The words you spoke were almost exactly those that have been passed down in my family. My mother taught them to me, and taught me as well that they should never be uttered."

"As I suspected. So the scions of the Kuonji family are, or at least were, practitioners of *onmyodo*. Now, let me ask, have you ever heard of a creature called the *oshobo*?"

"*Oshobo*? I might have heard of something with that name from my mother when I was very young—but I am afraid I don't know what it is."

"Detective Kiba! Sekiguchi! Did you hear that? The Kuonji house doesn't

have a history of *oshobo* possession, after all!" Kyogokudo's voice echoed loudly in the room, and he looked at me with a smile on his face. "It's just as I thought! The whole idea of an *oshobo* possessing people made no sense."

"Why not?" Kiba scowled. "That doesn't agree with what we've heard from the local jurisdiction down in Sanuki."

"I'm sure they reported what they knew, but their sources were only the local elders. Old, yes, but not five hundred or a thousand years old. Their memory only goes back seventy or eighty years at most."

"Well, sure, but they said it was a legend, and that must go back a ways. The Kuonjis were killing children and using their ghosts to haunt people—"

"See, that's just it. The whole concept of aborted-fetus spirits haunting people is very modern. It was only in this century that stories of that kind found purchase with a wider population. Back in Edo times, they wouldn't even hold a funeral for children who died before the age of seven. It got so bad, the government issued a 'proclamation of compassion' ordering people not to abandon their children."

"A proclamation of compassion? What, like laws about the humane treatment of pets?"

"Exactly. Younger children were little more valued than cats or dogs."

"But, Kyogokudo, didn't you say there was a story about aborted fetuses in *Life of a Woman*? That's Edo."

"Yes, but those were clearly identified as *ubume*. They weren't the modern aborted-fetus spirit out to get someone, but the manifestation of the mother's regrets. The *oshobo* has nothing to do with dead infants."

"So what is an *oshobo*, then?"

"A creature said to live in a region of Shikoku, appearing to be a child with the head of a *kappa*—those water spirits you find in stories elsewhere. I don't know the specifics, but they're a bit like the *zashiki-warashi* or *kura-bokko*, child-spirits that haunt people's homes and storehouses. You've heard of *zashiki-warashi*?"

Aoki cleared his throat. "I'm from the northeast, and we know all about *zashiki-warashi*. They're supposed to look like red-faced children, and when they're in your house, everything's fine, but when they leave, the family's fortunes go to pot."

"Splendid. I couldn't have asked for a better explanation. As Officer Aoki has just informed us, the *zashiki-warashi* serve the function of explaining why a family's fortunes might rise or fall—the exact same function performed by possession beliefs, incidentally. Of particular note is that the *zashiki-warashi* is merely sensed while it is in residence. It is only when the creature leaves the house that it can actually be observed. Generally the people doing the observing come from outside the household, and the event signals the house's downfall.

"In other words, the appearance of the *zashiki-warashi* is cited as a reason for the sudden decline of a house—usually of the nouveau riche recently come from outside the community—which had been doing well until that time. The presence of the *warashi* then retroactively serves as the reason for a house's past opulence. Once this way of thinking became widely accepted, the current progressive form of the *zashiki-warashi* came into being. That is, the notion that a *zashiki-warashi* might be responsible for a family's ongoing rise in fortunes. So we see that, by leaving the household, the *zashiki-warashi* performs the same societal function as possession."

Kyogokudo paused and surveyed his audience. "If we then postulate that the *oshobo* functions in this way as well, it starts making less sense for the *oshobo* to be used to possess other people. That would be sharing your own wealth with others, and you wouldn't want to send out something that hurts you when it leaves, anyway, would you?"

"So what does all this mean?" Kiba demanded impatiently.

"For one, it raises the suspicion that the story of the Kuonjis as told by the elders in Sanuki is a rather recent invention."

"Wait a second, Kyogokudo. What about the legend we heard from Tomiko Sawada? There was mention of a child-god in that one, too, I believe. You think that one was made-up, too?"

"Ah, you're referring to the story about the murdered pilgrim? No, I expect that's quite old, actually. And as for mention of child-gods..." Kyogokudo looked back at Mrs. Kuonji. "Do you know what sort of spirits were employed in the Kuonji practice of *onmyodo*?"

"Several, I believe. There was one called the *shiki-oji*, another called the *goho-doji* and then there were the various *doji* said to serve the Buddhist gods, the *Fudo Myo-o*."

"Just as I expected. Most spirits employed by *onmyodo* practioners were *doji*—which is another way of pronouncing the same two characters read elsewhere as *warashi*. I've heard that the first character, 'wara' or 'do' originally meant one of low stature—a servant, in other words. Eventually, the word came to mean something else: a child. I believe the confusion about the Kuonji's practice of *onmyodo* comes from this."

Kyogokudo went on to further suggest that *zashiki-warashi* were regarded as child spirits due to the influence of the same tradition.

"The child-god from Tomiko's tale wasn't some sort of *oshobo* or aborted-fetus come back to haunt the living—it was merely one of these spirit servants in child form. It has nothing to do with dead babies! Detective Kiba!"

Kiba jerked upright in his chair. "Wh-What?"

"I believe I've shown that the stories of the Kuonjis using *oshobo* to possess their enemies and killing their children for generations were little more than fabrication. Let us abandon these assumptions as we move forward."

I get it. The seemingly academic folkloric inquiry of the last few minutes had been leading up to this single point the whole time. It was classic Kyogokudo.

I remembered Tomiko Sawada clearly mentioning a "child god" in her story. She hadn't said anything about any *oshobo*. Yet with all the distressing talk of frogs and abortions, we had—no, I had linked the two together all on my own. My assumptions—the very ones Kyogokudo was now exhorting us to abandon—were coming from the same place as the prejudices that had plagued the Kuonjis for so long.

The lecture resumed.

"Now let's consider possible reasons why the Kuonjis were labeled as possessors. I'm sure the fact that they were *onmyoji*, or *tayu* as they were called in the region, had a lot to do with it. Yet I am also certain that an imbalance of wealth was at the root of these pernicious beliefs—a fact also attested to by Tomiko's story of the murdered pilgrim."

Kyogokudo turned back to Mrs. Kuonji. "The theme of the murdered pilgrim is an established motif in folklore. A family kills a wanderer from outside, appropriates his or her fortune, and prospers—yet they are also cursed for generations for their misdeed. Tomiko's story is a textbook example. While on the surface this might appear to be nothing more than slander, it usually runs deeper than that. After all, an utterly baseless rumor would be swiftly uprooted and washed away. For a story to be told and retold over generations, it must be persuasive. It must fit with the logic of the community. In folk society, the killing of the pilgrim—the outsider—serves the same function as possession and the *zashiki-warashi*: to explain an imbalance in wealth. Which suggests that Tomiko's story of the murdered pilgrim hails from an earlier time when the Kuonji family was disproportionately wealthy. Basically, for the legend to spread as it did, there had to have been some conditions at the time supporting it."

"And those conditions would be?"

"Probably the appointing of the Kuonji family as court physicians, and their ascension to the authority and wealth that position implies. They became suddenly rich, while others in the community remained as poor as ever—an imbalance. Tomiko's legend reflects that social reality. She also mentioned a secret book of medicinal remedies—a classic motif in and of itself. What happened next is that the legend of the murdered pilgrim, over time, shifted into one of possession. You see, Shikoku is known not only for the continued practice of *onmyodo*, but also for its rich possession beliefs. There are possessing dog, fox, and snake spirit stories in practically every village.

"Of course, because the Kuonjis had been *tayu* for generations they would have traditionally been seen as the ones responsible for curing a possession, not causing it. However, at some point, the associations must have gotten re-

versed. That was the beginning of hard times for the Kuonji household. And keep in mind that we are talking about events that occurred a considerable time ago—long before there would have been any mention of *oshobo* possession, or the employment of aborted-fetus spirits.”

“I never heard from my mother any such stories about our family line—though she did say they called us ‘black’...”

“‘Black’ here being a ritualistic word denoting a family with a history of possession. Regular folk are said to be ‘white,’ and the child of one regular parent and one possession-line parent is ‘gray.’ Based on what we’ve just heard, I would say the possibility is very low that the Kuonji family used any one spirit in particular. Yet the old folk in the region had no qualms about deciding on their own that they did, and the spirit they assigned to the Kuonjis was the *oshobo*.”

“So we have the old legend of the murdered pilgrim, and a second, much newer legend, of the *oshobo*. Because the Kuonjis themselves weren’t even aware of this latter story, we can safely say that it only arose around the time the family left Sanuki, if not much later.”

“In other words, it’s consistent with the idea that aborted-fetus spirit beliefs are a recent phenomenon,” Atsuko noted.

“Yes. Though ‘recent’ here still covers several decades, even with the main target of the beliefs—the Kuonji family—absent from the region. As was the case with the first legend, I’m guessing that something happened to trigger the rise of the second.”

“What kind of something?”

“It all has to do with the Kuonji family’s exodus to the capital. I’m guessing that around that time, too, there was an imbalance of wealth of the same order as that which resulted from the court physician appointment.”

“I have heard that that our family moved to Tokyo in 1871, just after the Meiji Period began and power was restored to the Emperor.”

“I see. So the second legend formed sometime around the Meiji Restoration. This leads me to suspect a particular incident—again, the murder of an outsider.”

Kyogokudo stared down Mrs. Kuonji. “I hear that Tokizo’s grandmother, too, was a pilgrim, visiting the shrines in Shikoku. They say she collapsed on her journey and was cared for by a Kuonji—your grandmother.”

The old lady of the house smiled, astonished. “There seems to be no end to your knowledge, Mr. Chuzenji. Yet I believe I am the only one who is aware that Tokizo’s grandmother—Tsuyuko, she was named—saved our family in turn through the money she carried. This I know from my mother.”

“I thought as much. So the stories of hereditary possession, murder, and the *oshobo* were conflated and combined, giving rise to a new story: that the Kuonjis used *oshobo* to possess others. This was no fable invented simply out of

jealousy toward a family leaving their village and heading for a better life in the capital. It was merely a cover story, a stand-in for an actual incident too horrible to mention. That is my opinion.”

“An incident?”

“Mrs. Kuonji. Did your grandmother not commit the *very same act that you and your daughter are guilty of?*”

The old woman’s eyes went wide, her mouth opening in a silent scream.

“Hey, Kyogoku. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This is merely conjecture. I have no proof, nor, indeed, any way to test my assertion. Yet I’m guessing that Tokizo’s grandmother, Tsuyuko, did not collapse on her journey and give birth, but instead came to Sanuki searching for her child who had been stolen—by your grandmother.”

Kyogokudo turned back to Mrs. Kuonji.

“Your grandmother lost her child, and in the shock of the aftermath, she sought to steal Tsuyuko’s child from her. Once we know this, the old tale begins to make sense. I’ve never heard of a woman on the verge of giving birth going on pilgrimage, but there are cases where women have gone on pilgrimage while suckling a newborn babe. No doubt Tsuyuko did—only to have it kidnapped. She came to the Kuonjis in pursuit of her child. *That’s* when she died, leaving the infant behind, along with the large sum of money she’d been carrying. It was a second killing of an outsider. Not to mention, a fortune won with a baby. That money became a part of the funds that helped the Kuonjis move to Tokyo.

“This is the truth behind the second legend. Though I think that your grandmother bore the woman she victimized no real ill will...”

“And so, unable to bear the censure of the community, the family left for the city. To make a break with the deeds of the past.”

“But we couldn’t—we *couldn’t* make a break.”

“No, you could. But you didn’t.”

“Hey!” Kiba tapped his foot impatiently. “I’m getting lost again, here. Someone mind explaining all this to me?”

Kyogokudo glanced at the police detective but continued unabated. “Your grandmother, filled with remorse and gratitude, raised the man who would become Tokizo’s father. As a servant, of course, but still she raised him in her home. Yet when it came your time to do the same, you failed.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘when it came her time’? I’m still lost, Kyogoku,” Kiba grumbled.

“I’m talking about Naito.”

“What?”

“History repeats itself,” Kyogokudo said. “There are no crueler words than these—and no truer. Mrs. Kuonji, like your grandmother before you,

you lost your firstborn, and stole another's with tragic results. Naito's mother died after you took him, didn't she?"

Mrs. Kuonji gasped. "She—had a weak heart. I didn't know. Everything was so confused—I was lost..."

"What, you really stole a woman's child? Ah, so the school money and child support for Naito was your way of saying sorry, is that it?"

The old woman frowned. "I did want to raise him as my own. It was my fault his parents died, after all. But it was not to be. There was our public image to consider. My mother—no, the Kuonji family—would not allow it. That is why I thought I might at least marry him to one of my daughters. And for that he would need schooling—that is why I sent the money."

"Did you know about this, Mr. Kuonji?"

"I suppose I knew, yes. Never found out what happened to the child after he left, but years later when she brought in Naito I had my suspicions. Still, she seemed set on keeping the whole thing a secret, so I held my tongue. No good would have come of making a fuss. If Naito had been just a little more trustworthy, I might have married him to one of my daughters, even if he wasn't a doctor. I was fine with him not keeping the hospital going. I was fine if it all ended with me." The old man sighed, the lines of his face deeply etched with regret.

"Well, be that as it may, why'd you take the kid in the first place?" Kiba asked. "Kyogoku—what was that you were saying about her losing a child?"

Kyogokudo gazed quietly at the faces of the old couple, then he said, softly, "Mrs. Kuonji. The unfortunate child to which you gave birth was no curse, no haunt. The real evil here lies in closing our mouths, and concealing the truth in the darkness. May I speak freely about what happened, Mrs. Kuonji?"

"You—you know about the child, too?"

Kyogokudo nodded slowly. His eyes went to the director. "Mr. Kuonji, I am admittedly no physician. So, let me ask you, in your experience, what percentage of children are born like your first child was? Could his condition not be something which happens in a family line—something that might be explained by genetics?"

The director furrowed his brows, pinching the wrinkled skin between his eyes with his fingers. After a while, he began to speak slowly, in fits and starts.

"If you take a broad view of things, it's not all that rare, though strictly by the numbers, the chance is phenomenally low. Yet, in my short life, I've witnessed such a birth twice. So, I'd have to say that what you're driving at is probably correct."

Kyogokudo waited for him to finish, then turned to the man's wife.

The once strident lady looked frail and shrunken. She caught Kyogokudo's gaze, and nodded weakly.

"The first child you bore—thirty years ago now—was born without a head, wasn't he?"

Born without a head!

So the child Enokizu saw in his vision, the baby with the face of a frog—the first child that Tomiko Sawada saw thirty years before—was acephalous! Born with a reduced brain and cranium—a headless child!

I had been shown photographs once in my university lab of an unlucky infant with the condition. There was nothing above the eyes, giving it the appearance of a frog...

My stomach churned and I clapped a hand over my mouth.

"The Kuonji family line—if that is the proper term here—has a high percentage chance of producing acephalous children. I do not know the cause. Yet this is not something that occurs because of a curse or spell. It is strictly a medical phenomenon with a scientific explanation—like a disease or injury. It is not cause for shame, or something which must be concealed. Yet our society is not a forgiving one in these matters. Not just the acephalous, but children born with any birth defect have never received fair treatment. This is the sad truth—a truth that has not much changed over the years, even now in modern times."

Kyogokudo stopped and glanced at the old woman. The sadness was welling up inside her; only a last shred of resilience held back the flood.

"In folk societies, deformed or disabled infants are sometimes greeted as omens of luck, at other times discarded as demon-children. In the Kuonji family's case, it was the latter. With each generation, acephalous infants were born, and buried in darkness as cursed children. This became a tradition, going on for centuries. We cannot fault you or your family for this; it was simply 'what was done' in those times. But times have changed. I would have hoped that your mother would have realized this and broken with tradition. Even more so, you."

Kikuno Kuonji reached her limit and collapsed into tears.

Her husband, sitting next to her, gazed at her sympathetically, and slowly began to speak. "I never cared much for superstition. When I came into the family, I knew about the rumors, and there were plenty of them. Half of me wanted to marry a Kuonji just to prove a point. I'd take apart those foolish old customs with a sledgehammer if I had to. Yet tradition was a steeper hill to climb than I'd reckoned. I went ahead full steam at first, of course, but then Kikuno got pregnant. That's when my mother-in-law came calling. She told me that if our child was a boy, we would have to kill him. Kill him! I was furious. Yet when the child was born, he...he didn't have a head. I delivered him myself. It was a shock. My mother-in-law was there, and when she saw the child, she—"

"Stop!" The weeping old woman screamed with the intensity of a small child.

"Did she kill it?" Kiba asked. "If she did, that's murder. I don't care if it was her own grandson, or what birth defects he might have had. Murder is murder—and you just stood there and let it happen?"

"That's fine for you to say, detective, but we're not talking about a common birth. Acephalous babies don't live long—a few minutes at most. They don't have brains, you see. The child might have been stillborn for all I know. I didn't even have time to check!"

"Regardless," Kyogokudo said, staring at Kiba. "Detective Kiba, regardless of what might have been done, this couple had to watch their own child die before their very own eyes. That is punishment enough. Please, don't seek to punish them further. Even the latest science can't determine whether a child will be male or female, nor the likelihood they will suffer defects. And this was thirty years ago. If they had abstained from ever having children on the chance that they might be born misshapen, the family would have died out long ago. As the Kuonjis understood it, they had to give birth, and, if the child were disabled, they would end its life as dictated by folk society. How could they do otherwise? Besides, as the doctor says, the child would not have lived long anyway."

Kikuno put her hands over her face and sobbed.

Kyogokudo looked at her for a while before speaking again. "What I would like to know is this: how did the child's grandmother—your mother—end his life? I know it is a difficult thing to speak of, and I do not ask lightly, yet this may be a vital key to understanding what has happened here over the years."

The director answered in place of his wife. "My mother-in-law, she...she took a stone. She was carrying it with her. The child didn't even cry. She took the baby from me, its umbilical cord still attached. Then she placed it on the floor, said something—a spell—and hit it with a rock. I wasn't sure if it was alive or not to begin with, but after that..."

"Hitting it with a rock was the...the tradition," Mrs. Kuonji said, her voice choked with tears. "My mother was a harsh person. I could never defy her, not even then... Yet a woman's body is a strange thing. My child was dead, but when I heard a baby cry, my breasts would ache. I lay in a daze for two or three days, but on the third day—I'm not sure how it happened—I found myself holding a newborn babe, nursing it. If this wasn't a birth clinic, if there hadn't been any babies nearby, maybe it never would have happened. My mother took the baby—Naito—away for me, but it was already too late. The child's mother was dead. My mother hid the child to save face for a while—but then the father, too, in his despair..."

"When you Kuonjis came to Tokyo you should have thrown away the

past," Kyogokudo said sternly. "The family name, and the curse—your fate—are just sides of a coin. You cannot take one and hope to leave the other behind. Folk societies adhere to certain rules. All that happens within them, including curses, must follow these rules. Families are not censured at a whim. In folk societies, an unspoken contract is formed between the ones who curse, and the accursed. Spells—the curses themselves—are simply a means of communication within the terms of that contract. Yet, modern society has done away with the stipulations of that contract.

"Within a traditional community there are also relief mechanisms for curses. As the fruits of our labors might be attributed to possession, so can we blame our failure and ruination on the *zashiki-warashi*. Yet urban societies have none of these relief mechanisms. All we have are murky prejudices hiding behind a mask of freedom, equality, and democracy. In our modern cities, curses are reduced to mere slander and vicious rumors, but they serve the same function. Yet because you did not leave the conventions of your old lives behind when you came, you added to the two old legends and created a third here, in Tokyo."

"Which is the story behind the case at hand," Atsuko said, speaking for the lady of the house, who sat with her head hung low, chewing on every word Kyogokudo said.

"Yes. While oral traditions might continue on for a great length of time in a given location, urban legends are different. Though their lifespans are short, they spread like wildfire. Cultural homogenization and the growth of media—newspapers and magazines—add fuel to the flames."

"The tabloids, you mean."

"Yes. An adopted son vanishing from a sealed room, a child that won't be born, infants gone missing one after the other—rumors are the city's legends. And the starring character in this new, third legend was Ryoko."

Was...Ryoko?

"What? Not Kyoko?" Kiba said, giving voice to my own question.

"I'm afraid Kyoko was merely the hapless sidekick in this particular story. Ryoko was the main character from start to finish. Isn't that right, Mrs. Kuonji? Mr. Kuonji?"

There was no response.

"I'm really going to need an explanation now."

Kyogokudo looked at Kiba, then at me, a terrible sadness in his eyes. "It all began with a love letter."

Kiba's eyes, then the eyes of everyone in the room, turned toward me.

"Twelve years ago, a very serious and straight-laced student named Makio Fujino fell passionately in love for the first time in his life. The object of

his affections was Kyoko Kuonji, only fifteen years old at the time. Makio confirmed his feelings with a letter—which he entrusted to the very same Mr. Sekiguchi now sitting with us in this room.”

“But—but Kyoko claims she never got a letter. Wasn’t that where all the trouble started?”

“Indeed it was. The trouble started because Kyoko never received the letter.”

“Wait a second, Kyogokudo. She had to have gotten it. I gave it to her! You know what I went through—”

“Oh, I know, Mr. Sekiguchi. But the girl to whom you gave that letter was not Kyoko, but Ryoko.”

That’s impossible! That would mean that I—that Ryoko and I had—

“But I showed her the letter! I said I’d only give it to the person to whom it was addressed. Are you saying Ryoko lied and told me she was her sister? I know they looked a lot alike back then, but that’s ridiculous.”

“I do not think it was a lie, at least at first. I’m guessing that the first name as written on the letter was this...”

Kyogokudo took a brush out of a small case he was carrying and wrote on a small piece of folded paper he pulled from the breast of his kimono:

京子

“Do you remember Fujimaki’s diary? This is none other than the ‘trivial, gross error’ he spoke of. Kyoko’s name is unusual in that it is written with the ‘*kyo*’ of *kikyo*, a Chinese bellflower.”

The bookseller quickly scribbled the character on his piece of paper:

梗

“Not a character you see too often. Someone only hearing her name could be forgiven for assuming that she wrote it with the much more common ‘*kyo*’ of Kyoto or Kyogokudo, which, it so happens, resembles quite closely the first character in ‘Ryoko’...”

涼子

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “You can’t dupe me with your wiles this time, Kyogokudo. There are plenty of other characters he also might have used for the ‘*kyo*’ in ‘Kyoko.’ I can think of ten off the top of my head! Why’d he have to use *that* one? I’m not buying it! And anyhow I think *she* would have noticed the difference.”

“I suspected you might say that, so I looked into it a little more closely. Mr. Kuonji, did you not say that your family took its last vacation around the time of the war in China?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“Mr. Sekiguchi, the day you came here, the 16th of September, 1940—the day your depression began—was precisely the day that the Kuonji family was taking its last family vacation. I checked with the hotel in Hakone and their guestbook confirms three visitors: Yoshichika, Kikuno, and Kyoko Kuonji. The only people at the hospital that day were Tokizo, his wife, and Ryoko.”

“But that, that means—”

The girl I shamed... was Ryoko.

Every muscle in my body went limp, my joints loosening into free-spinning hinges. I became a wooden puppet, dangling from its strings.

Ryoko, the woman I found it hard even to look at, let alone speak to. The whole idea of her had felt almost taboo to me from the moment I saw her in Enokizu’s office. But now, I realized that the familiarity I had felt when I held her wasn’t some recollection from a past life. The memory might have fled my brain entirely, but my body—in each of my individual cells—my body remembered.

“I—I—” I stammered.

Kyogokudo shot me a look that said *speaking no further*.

“See, you *had* met her!” Enokizu said brightly.

I did more than that.

I heard Kiba’s high voice, sounding miles away. “Right, so the one who got the love letter, met clandestinely with Makio Fujino, and had his love child was—”

“Ryoko.”

“Is that true? Ryoko was sleeping with Makio?” the director spluttered. His skin had gone the color of clay, and his thick lips trembled. “K-Kikuno,” he said, calling his wife by her name for the first time, “did you know about this?”

The old, weary mother opened her eyes, red from tears. “Not then.”

“Not then!”

“Yes, it wasn’t until September of last year, I believe. I’d heard from Tomiko that all was not well with the young couple; so I went to see for myself. On my way over there, I passed by the laboratory and saw the door was open. I peeked inside, and Makio was not there—but on his desk there was a letter. I didn’t intend to pry, but...”

“What did the letter say?” Kyogokudo asked quietly.

“It was dated New Year’s Eve, 1940. It was in Ryoko’s handwriting. It said she thought she might be pregnant. I couldn’t believe it! Here was Makio, who had spent ten years winning Kyoko’s hand, sleeping with his wife’s sister? And if Makio had been responsible for Ryoko’s pregnancy ten years before, then he

had *already been seeing her* when he came to ask for permission to marry Kyoko. I decided that the two of them—Ryoko and Makio—were now conspiring to get revenge on our house. It was the only thing that made sense.”

“Revenge?”

“Yes, for the child—their child. I became frightened, terribly so. I felt I had to do something. And to think of Kyoko, the poor girl... She had done nothing wrong. If anyone deserved their venom, it was me. I summoned Kyoko in private and asked if Makio might not be secretly seeing Ryoko, saying nothing of what I knew, of course. But Kyoko said she knew nothing of any dalliance.”

“Which is when Kyoko began to suspect the two of them. Mrs. Kuonji, it seems like your worrying was the trigger that set off this entire tragedy,” Kiba said.

A kind of horror crept into Kikuno’s expression.

Her husband was staring blankly at a teacup on the table. “Why didn’t you tell me? Not a single word. Why?” he muttered.

“You told me you didn’t want to hear any of it. The disappearing children, the rumors. I was only doing what I could, what anyone would do—”

“I know. I know, but—”

“Mrs. Kuonji. It sounds like you were involved in a cover-up.”

Kiba’s observation interrupted the spat between the old couple, leaving an uncomfortable silence to linger in its place.

It was Kyogokudo’s calm voice that broke the silence. “Can you tell me more about Kyoko? There are still some things I do not understand.”

“Things the *onmyoji* does not understand? I thought you were all-knowing.”

“Of course not. I am merely linking together what scattered fragments of the truth I can find. It is hard to see the whole picture with so many parts missing.”

Kikuno smiled faintly. Then she began to speak, and a gentle look came into her eyes that I had not seen before. “My first child was born to die, and I had stolen another’s child soon after. Neither was an easy recovery. Yet, with my husband’s help, I did recover, and two years later I was pregnant again. When I thought this child, too, might be born like my first had, it made me so uneasy I felt I might go mad. The months of my second pregnancy felt like years. Yet in the end, Ryoko was born. She was a weak child, always sick. Compared to her, Kyoko, who arrived a year later, was the epitome of health. Ryoko developed slowly, so much so that it became difficult to tell who was the elder of the two. They looked so much alike in those days. But, as she got older, Ryoko began to show the signs of the Kuonji curse.”

“What sort of signs?”

“Well, quite suddenly one day, she began suffering spells of—well, she seemed *hollow*. She became terribly disoriented; not herself, you might say.”

“And that’s the sign of some curse?” Kiba asked dubiously.

“Thankfully neither I nor my mother had suffered from this. Yet my grandmother often had such spells. They called it possession—divine possession. When her spells came, my grandmother would speak in the voices of things that were not human, and say things no one should have known. I pitied Ryoko, but at the same time, I was frightened by her. Even without her hollow spells, she was too ill to properly attend school. She could not play outdoors, and had few friends.”

Kyogokudo asked if the two sisters got along.

“They were quite different, to be sure. Kyoko all active and lively, and Ryoko strangely mature, almost wise at times. Yet Kyoko always looked out for her more delicate sister, and I do not think they quarreled much. Ours was not the most perfect of families but until that happened—until the business with Ryoko’s pregnancy—I think we were happy enough.”

“So your daughter was seeing a man and you had no idea?” Kiba asked, a look of mild exasperation on his face.

“Ryoko hardly ever went outside, and in some ways her development lagged—by which I mean, she had not yet begun her period. I think Kyoko’s came first, actually. In any case, during that entire time life went on pretty much the same as always. I didn’t notice a thing.”

—Red.

A single line of red.

Could that have been her first period?

I shook my head.

“What about you, director? Did you have any idea your daughter was, er...”

“None whatsoever. Why, I believe the first time I really realized my girls had grown into women was when Makio came asking for my daughter’s hand.”

“But Fujimaki—Makio—had previously mistaken the older sister for the younger. Didn’t you think anything was amiss when he asked to marry your *younger* daughter?”

“No. We discovered Ryoko’s pregnancy afterwards, or I might have suspected something. He had already come and gone a month by the time we found out. She was in her second trimester by then.”

“We had been so sure of our daughter—so trusting—that even when her belly got large, we never suspected she was pregnant. It appeared that she’d had no idea either. When we found out, though, Ryoko changed. I told her she should get rid of the child. She wouldn’t tell us who the father was, and raising a child alone was unthinkable in those days. But when I spoke to her about this she became violent—entirely out of control, as if some wild animal had possessed her. She hit me and kicked me so many times that even my bruises had

bruises. I was completely at a loss as to how to deal with this—with her. Yet I felt that, whatever happened, Kyoko should not be exposed to this disgraceful situation. As soon as we found out about the pregnancy, we sent Kyoko to stay at a respectable home—friends of ours—for finishing school. That was our excuse, at least.”

“That’s odd. You say that Ryoko didn’t seem aware of her own pregnancy; yet the letter in which she told Makio of the child had been written on New Year’s Eve of the year before. Of course she knew about the pregnancy.”

“Yes. That is why, when I read the letter all those years later, I began to suspect my own daughter of having plotted the whole thing. She’d been deceiving us—I was sure of it. For me, those weeks had been a living hell. I’d thought perhaps I should just let go, just let her have the child—”

“But you were worried about the curse,” Kyogokudo said quietly.

It was the director who answered. “We were. I felt that there was a good chance her child would be born acephalous. Besides, with her weak constitution, the birth itself would be a life-threatening experience. It was not something I, as a doctor, could recommend going ahead with. Yet we were already approaching the seventh month; an abortion at such a late stage would also have been very risky.”

“Ryoko grew more and more violent by the day, until she shut herself up in the supply room for the pediatrics ward—that’s the small room next to the archives.”

“Shut herself up? How did she get in there?”

“It was still open at the time. All you needed to do was lock the padlock on the outside door, and then take the key with you through the inside door. Lock that from the inside and no one else could get in.”

“Didn’t the pediatrician—Dr. Sugano, was it?—didn’t he have the key to that padlock? How did Ryoko get it?”

“Ah, Dr. Sugano—”

“He wasn’t there at the time. He got scarce just before then—well, he vanished, really. Couldn’t run our pediatrics ward after that, so we had already closed the whole place off. I’m guessing the key was left in the main building.”

“Hey, hold on a second. Sekiguchi, didn’t you say that this Dr. Sugano had the key when he died in the war, and the room hadn’t been opened since?”

“That’s—that’s what Ryoko told me,” I said, my voice flat. I spoke the words like a bad actor reading out his lines.

“Sugano died in the war? Not that I know of. He just disappeared without so much as a warning, and we’ve never heard from him since. I think it was—that’s right, it was right after Makio came to propose. We took care of the patients he was seeing at the time, but we couldn’t properly treat the new ones. There was all the fuss with Ryoko then, too; so, come spring, we shut the

whole building down.”

“So Ryoko lied to our friend here.”

“What did Ryoko do after she shut herself in the room?” Kyogokudo asked, steering the conversation back on course. It was the lady of the house who continued.

“You can hardly hear a thing through those doors. Even when I pressed my ear to the wood, I could only just make out her screams. She would not come out unless I let her have her baby, she said. For three days, I lay by the door, weeping, begging her to come out. On the fourth day, I shouted as loudly as I could that I would let her have her child. She came out then, and she looked... She looked just as weary as her sister does now, but she pranced and giggled like a child. That vicious animal in her—all the violence—was gone so completely it might’ve been a dream. From that day on, Ryoko took up residence in the pediatrics ward, awaiting the birth. We kept her out of sight, and she was perfectly calm, for the most part. I was a wreck, however, when I thought of what might come. I’d had a husband to support me after my first birth, but there was no one for Ryoko—there was no father.”

It was raining outside. The distant patter made the silence in the room seem all the more complete.

“And then—it was in the summer—right about this time of year—Ryoko was... She delivered in that room—in the archives—her child...”

“Her headless child.”

In that very same room!

“Then I did—I did what my mother had done. With the same rock. I hit the child. *I killed it.*”

“Ryoko flew into a rage. Physically, she had been wasting away, treading the line between life and death. Yet despite her weakness, she went wild, like an animal—”

“And she took another woman’s baby,” Kyogokudo said, breaking his long silence.

Kikuno nodded. “She did. That very same day. I was amazed; I hadn’t even been able to get out of bed for three days after my first birth. I quickly returned the child to its mother, of course. I didn’t want my daughter to make the same mistake I had. But Ryoko resisted. When I eventually tore the babe away from her, she became even more violent than before. And this just after giving birth! Fearing she might hurt herself, my husband and I restrained her. We tied her to her bed.”

“But that’s not all you did.”

“No. I took the child—the headless child I had killed—I put it in forma-

lin—and put it... I put it next to her pillow.”

“That’s monstrous!” Atsuko said, her voice ringing out in the quiet room.

“I wanted her to know that her child had died. I feared that, if I did not make her face that fact, she would keep stealing babies. I knew what she was feeling, I knew it better than anyone else. But there was no other way. And I wanted her to know the weight of her sin—creating life so irresponsibly. Her dalliance had resulted in this poor, pitiable child. I wanted her to know what the child felt, the child who had to die. Yes, it was monstrous. But call me what you will, I needed her to understand.”

“The child didn’t have to die. You killed it,” Kyogokudo said, his voice quiet but stern. “A cruel truth, but a truth nonetheless. I understand your rationale, but did you ever consider what this punishment meant to Ryoko? All you did was visit the same suffering upon your daughter as you yourself had suffered. You took the ancient, ridiculous curse that had been laid upon you and passed it right on to your daughter.”

“I—I only did—”

“What you did was a mistake,” Kyogokudo continued, his voice harsher still. “What you should have done was show her the understanding and acceptance of a loving mother, and the modernity and courage to break from ancient customs. Yet you failed on every count. Had you only been able to love Ryoko, all the tragedies which followed might well have been avoided.”

Kyogokudo stood up silently, yet it was with an unusual tenderness that he asked his next question.

“Tell me, what happened to Ryoko afterwards?”

“Indeed, it is as you say... I was inadequate as a mother. I didn’t know how to show my daughter love—the love I was never shown myself. For three days and three nights, whenever she wasn’t sedated, Ryoko wept and wailed. I sat by her bed and I talked to her of morals and such. I must have sounded like an ethics textbook come to life. This went on for a week—no, longer—almost ten days. Then, one morning, I came in and found that she had grown calm. She acknowledged her mistake and politely apologized. With that, I released her. And after that, she never acted that way again—wild, I mean. I was relieved—”

“Yet other infants disappeared.”

“Yes, twice. In September and November of that same year.”

Kiba lifted an eyebrow. “So there were missing children from your hospital *before* the case I worked on? Did Ryoko steal those babies, too?”

“No, at least, I do not think so,” the old woman said, turning to the outraged detective. “To tell the truth, I have no idea who took those babies. I suspected my daughter, to be sure, yet she never showed signs that she had cared

for them, or even that she had disposed of them. She was just living her life as if nothing were amiss. That is why I doubt she was to blame. At the time, I thought it might be her man—whoever that was—doing it to get back at us. But then the war started, and we lost track of everything.”

“What about the missing children years later—the case I was on? You spread a considerable amount of money around. You must have been covering up something!”

“In the summer, when the first child went missing, I was surprised. I didn’t suspect Ryoko at all at first—what she had done was in the past. Yet, when I saw that letter in September, I began thinking about it again. If Makio was the one who had made love to Ryoko ten years ago, then that would make him my prime suspect.”

“He stole the babies to get back at you for killing his own?”

“Yes. And when the children went missing in September and then November, my suspicions toward Ryoko and Makio grew. Yet, if they really were to blame, what would it mean for us, for my family? One was my natural daughter, the other my adopted son. If things got out, the one who would be worst harmed would be Kyoko—poor, innocent Kyoko. Then came the thing I had been dreading all along. A police investigation. Quickly, I went to the houses of the victims and did what I could: I offered money and other assistance, begging them to drop the charges. I used the money Makio had brought with him when he joined our family. It was all we had at the time.”

“But that’s not all you did, is it?” Kiba growled. “You drugged those mothers with something!”

“I—I did nothing of the sort. All I did was lie. I told them the babies had been stillborn—that we’d disposed of them...”

“The babies were stillborn? And the mothers just accepted this?”

“Well...”

The director frowned. “I don’t know anything about drugs, but now that you mention it, the women did seem strange—every one of them—like they had been given some kind of sleeping medication. You’re right: if they had been in their right minds such a simple line never would have stood up to any amount of scrutiny. But they weren’t, were they? Still, it wasn’t me who drugged them, I’ll swear to that. I gave no such orders, either.”

“Well, it all sounds a little too convenient, if you ask me. Tell me, did you fire the nurses to keep them quiet, too?”

“No, they quit on their own accord—they’d probably had enough of things here.”

“You sure gave them a lot of money as a parting gift, then. And you helped find new jobs for them, too, I hear?”

“The money was my wife’s doing—she’s the head of accounts, mind you. Helping them find work we did out of kindness.”

"I intended the money as an apology. They all worked so hard for us. They were good nurses."

"An apology, right," Kiba said, clearly unconvinced. Not that it made much sense for either of the two to lie at this point.

"What about the late Sumie Toda? It sounds like she knew it was your daughter all along. Maybe she put pressure on Ryoko, and got something slipped into her drink in return?"

"Eh? What's that? Sumie's dead? Up in Toyama?"

"No, right here in Ikebukuro. You didn't know?"

"I didn't even know she'd come back. I thought she was still working at that clinic in the countryside."

"I didn't know about it either," the old man grunted. "That's a shock. Poor girl..."

"So you really didn't know? Great. So much for that extortion theory." Kiba held his head in his hands and looked down at the floor.

Kyogokudo shot him a sidelong glance, then asked, "Were Sumie and Ryoko close?"

"Well, Sumie was always a bit of an odd bird, but she always took good care of Ryoko when my daughter had a bout of ill health. So I think she was probably closer to her than the other nurses."

"I see," Kyogokudo said, nodding and closing his eyes. He seemed to be thinking deeply about something.

Without any prompting, Kikuno began to talk. "I was relieved when the families dropped the case against us, but I had no idea what to do next. Our money was disappearing before my eyes—not that there was any proof of what had happened, or anything to cause our immediate undoing. Still, the divide among us as a family grew deeper and deeper. Then just after the new year began, Makio disappeared. Or rather, he died. And then, Kyoko's pregnancy... It was like the horrors of ten years before all over again. I thought it was all Makio's doing; he was trying to do to Kyoko what he had done to Ryoko; the abduction of the infants had merely been a prelude. Yet I could get nothing out of Ryoko about it. Kyoko was so like her—like Ryoko had been—her belly swelling larger by the day. I didn't want to go through it all again, I didn't want her to have to go through it. Yet..."

Kiba nodded. "Ryoko moved her sister into where *she* had been during *her* pregnancy. Which makes a kind of sense. I suppose it was where Kyoko was living anyway, and the place where her husband had disappeared."

"Yes, the very same room—which is why I was too frightened to go there. I had dreams, terrible dreams of Kyoko becoming wild like Ryoko had, of me killing her headless child. Of course, I expected it all to end in several months, for better or for worse. But it didn't. As the pregnancy drew out longer and longer, I became exhausted; I stopped looking ahead, toward the future. That

is when, in my hatred for Makio, I cursed him. What a fool of a woman I've been! What a fool of a mother..."

Kikuno Kuonji stopped speaking then and began to weep, the first sob twisting her frail body like a convulsion.

Kyogokudo, who had listened in silence with eyes downcast until she was finished, now stepped forward to stand directly before the director. "We can see almost completely now the shape of events as they have occurred. This family history is like a jigsaw puzzle. Find but one more piece, I think, and we will be able to view the whole picture clearly. Director, tell me: what sort of fellow was your pediatrician, Dr. Sugano?"

The old man spoke slowly. He appeared determined to hold on to his reason, even now, when his eyes were dead to the world, and his purple lips trembled with every word. "S-Sugano? I had entrusted pediatrics to a doctor who'd graduated from my alma mater a few years before me. Sugano was his classmate. I had him helping out part-time at first. When the head of pediatrics passed away in 1932, Sugano took his place. He was very interested in the family, in our history, and the old books passed down from earlier generations. He spent a lot of time in the archives—which back then was in a different place. He asked to be let in so many times, I eventually just gave him the key."

"Fascinating. What was he like as a person?"

"He didn't have the best reputation, admittedly. Which is why I confess I didn't bother looking for him when he disappeared."

"What do you mean?"

"He was too friendly with children—the girls. Used to play with them, and not in a nice way. It was just a rumor, but still, word gets around. And those sick men who lust for the youngest ones do exist; they're all around. Maybe he was one of those. Of course, now we'll never know."

"And this Dr. Sugano was Ryoko's pediatrician as well, perhaps?"

"That's right. When she was very young, his predecessor looked after her, but after he passed away, she was under Sugano's care, yes. Not for long, though."

"I see. By the way, Mrs. Kuonji—those scrolls of mystical knowledge we heard about in the legend of the pilgrim—do they really exist?"

Kikuno looked up sharply. She was plainly astonished. "Scrolls? Well, not scrolls, exactly, but I do remember seeing copies of some old medical texts that were supposed to have been a secret many, many years ago. They were very old—kept in a box of paulownia wood, as I recall. I never read them myself."

"And you have these in your possession now?"

"I would think they are in the archives, but I do not know for sure. I do not believe I've seen them since the war."

"I see. Now, tell me: when he disappeared, about how old would you say Dr. Sugano was—that is, how old did he appear?"

"Hrm. He graduated seven years ahead of me, so that would have made him around fifty-five at the time—though, now that you mention it, he did look old for his age. I might have supposed that he was over sixty if I didn't know better."

Kyogokudo shot the old man a brief, piercing look, then he nodded to the couple. "Very well. I am through with my questions. I'm sorry to have asked so many difficult things of you and dredged up so many painful memories. You have my apologies. Detective Kiba, Mr. and Mrs. Kuonji seem quite fatigued. Perhaps it would be best to end the questioning here. Of course, I leave it to the judgment of the police."

"Hey, don't go wrapping things up all on your own, now. I still haven't got the faintest clue what's going on."

"I, however, have grasped the basic essence of the situation and will explain it to you. I believe these two know nothing more than what they have told us. Questioning them further would be akin to torture."

The old man weakly raised his hand. "A moment, sir. I—"

"I'm sorry, I haven't mentioned my own name since last night. I am Akihiko Chuzenji," Kyogokudo said slowly.

"Mr. Chuzenji, then. You say you understand what has happened. Would you mind telling me? I—we—need to hear, I think. Kikuno?"

He looked over at his wife. Her eyes were dry.

Gone was the noble heiress, the prim and proper head of hospital accounts, and the embattled scion of Kuonji, cursed and reviled. In her place was simply an old mother, tired from crying.

"Some truths are best not known."

"We'll find out sooner or later."

"This might be difficult for you, and especially your wife, to hear."

"We're used to hearing difficult things."

"I see."

Kyogokudo looked over the assembled people in the room, and sighed deeply. Then he turned to me.

I didn't want to hear it.

The truth...

I knew what was going to happen. My friend was going to tell us *what she had done*, with that same cold, matter-of-fact manner of his. Even though everyone already knew what it was.

"The thing I couldn't figure out, not until the very end, was who had delivered Ryoko's letter to Makio," Kyogokudo said, facing the Kuonjis again. "His journal merely stated that an 'elderly man' had brought it. At first, I

suspected it was Tokizo, but that didn't quite fit. He would only have been in his forties then—a little young to qualify as elderly. And, being the paragon of loyalty that he was, I can hardly imagine him knowing about an affair without bringing it to you, the parents."

"Quite right. If Tokizo had ever found out he would have come to us first thing. But, Mr. Chuzenji, there were no elderly men in our house back then. The older generation had passed away long before. I was the oldest—"

"Why not Dr. Sugano?"

"Sugano? But he wasn't elderly—that is, well, if you didn't know him, perhaps. But why would he be in the picture in any case?"

"Because, in my estimation, Dr. Sugano was the trigger that put these events in motion."

"What exactly are you claiming he did?"

"There is no certainty, of course; he has been missing for more than a decade now. So all of what I am about to say falls firmly within the realm of conjecture. Furthermore, all I know of Dr. Sugano's character is what I've just heard from you. However, these scraps of information come together to suggest one possibility, which happens to coincide with my suspicions."

Kyogokudo pulled his hand from where it had been tucked into the breast of his kimono and rubbed his chin. "First of all, we've heard that Dr. Sugano appeared somewhat older than his true age. If he did, indeed, look over sixty, Makio might well have thought him elderly. Furthermore, there is the possibility that he was sexually deviant, a pedophile favoring young girls. Sadly, the fact of the matter is that this is not at all a rare affliction, and chances are there was some truth behind those rumors. Next we hear he was interested in old writings, and was Ryoko's primary physician for a time. Finally, he disappeared directly after Makio arrived to propose."

"How does all that mesh together, exactly? Sounds like a bunch of unrelated observations to me," Kiba scoffed.

"Let us assume that Dr. Sugano was sexually deviant. To be sure, there are many levels of this, but I think it's safe to say that whatever degree of deviancy Dr. Sugano exhibited, it was licentious enough that our society would have branded it immoral should it have come to light. Thus, in order to satisfy his cravings he was obliged to commit something close to a crime."

"There's no such thing as close to a crime, Kyogoku. He's a criminal!"

"Surely, had he laid a hand on one of his patients, it would have meant an end to his career. Still, from the fact that there were rumors, we can presume that he could not fully control his desires. Such behavior is not easily controlled, let alone remedied entirely."

"True enough."

"So Dr. Sugano devised a plan. He was dealing with children. If only he could find a way to make them forget what had been done to them, he

wouldn't be found out."

"Why should it matter if they were children, if they couldn't remember it? Good thing that's impossible or the whole world would be full of rapists. Believe me, there's plenty of perverts out there who'd jump at the chance."

"Well, the Kuonji house was, from ancient times, skilled at the manufacture of medicinal remedies from herbs. There are plenty of such herbs growing on the premises even now. And the means of manufacture was passed down through the family, was it not?"

"That is true," Mrs. Kuonji admitted, "but most of that knowledge was lost when the previous generation passed away. My husband was a surgeon originally and didn't care for such things."

"Only because Japan's physicians need to modernize. I won't have anyone in my hospital wasting time on herbal remedies and superstitions."

"Which is probably why you never bothered to study the old medical texts in that storehouse, am I correct?"

"That's true enough. I never did read them. Most of them, the language was so old I wouldn't have been able to get through it if I'd tried. But I realized they had some cultural value. That's why we kept them."

"Books have value beyond their worth as historical artifacts, or their price tag as antiques. If the reader is skilled enough to understand them, even something written hundreds of years ago can be as valuable as something written yesterday. No book in the world, I have found, is entirely without use."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I suspect that, from those old pages, Dr. Sugano learned how to make a particular philter that had been passed down the Kuonji line for generations."

"Excuse me?"

"A love potion using *datura*."

"You mean the morning glories in our garden? I know about them. Those were the same ones Dr. Seishu Hanaoka used in the first full-body anesthesia operation in Japan."

"Hanaoka's *tsusensan* was developed from the anesthesia-water they employed in China. However, *datura* has a slightly different history in medieval Europe, where it was used exclusively as an aphrodisiac. The proprietors of brothels would take young maidens, force them to imbibe a mixture of *datura*, then send them to their rooms with a client. Even the purest girl with no intention of giving herself to anyone was transformed into the lowliest sort of prostitute. Very popular with the clientele. And there was another effect of the drug, namely that when its potency wore off, the girls would remember nothing of what had transpired. I have read that it was used in much the same way in India and other parts of Asia. *Datura*, you see, has been used since ancient times as a means for men to satisfy their basest desires without consent."

"So then Dr. Sugano—"

"The trance-like state the herbal drug brings on is very similar to the condition known as 'divine possession.' While there are forms of religious ecstasy that do not require pharmaceutical substances, there are also many that seek to induce or augment the experience through artificial means; and it's no surprise. If one wanted the ability to create a state of 'possession' at will, *datura* would be highly effective."

"And you say the method of preparing it was passed down through our family?"

"I would think so, yes, though of course I have no way of knowing when the practice started. Nor do I know whether Dr. Sugano looked through those old documents in search of the technique, or if he simply had an interest in old writings and stumbled upon it by accident. Either way, find it he did. And it occurred to him that the formula could be used to satisfy his own desires. So he searched for victims from among his own patients. To avoid unwanted rumors, he chose carefully, eventually selecting not a regular patient, but someone always nearby and thus easily controlled—and a beautiful young girl, besides."

"You mean Ryoko—Sugano was doing those things to Ryoko?" the director gasped, his voice cracking.

"The 'hollow' spells from which Ryoko occasionally suffered are evidence of it. Perhaps she was predisposed to such spells from birth—the *datura* could have served as a catalyst. The effects of the drug can last two or even three days. If Dr. Sugano administered it to her, then he could have had his way with her—"

"Hold on, Kyogokudo!" I shouted. I'd had enough. "You can't say things like that based on pure conjecture! If you're wrong, you're slandering not only Dr. Sugano, but Ryoko as well!"

I couldn't bear to hear any more.

"Relax, Sekiguchi. He's not finished yet," Kiba said.

Kyogokudo shot me a pitying look before continuing.

"Sexual abuse in childhood is said to have a profound effect on the development of the victim's personality, but Ryoko was an unusual case. She was never abused in her natural, conscious state. She was abused while in a trance, something close to so-called divine possession—in other words, while out of body and mind. These terrible things happened not to her, but to the shell she left behind, each experience piling atop the other until the shell was filled, and a second personality was born."

—*Want to play?*

—*Mm hm hm.*

"—Much to Dr. Sugano's dismay, I'm sure. Suddenly, this girl who had effectively been a doll, acquiescing to his every whim, had a will of her own. Of course, her personality developed gradually over time, but there was a single event that catapulted it from an inkling to an identity: the love letter."

—*Is that a letter?*

—*You're in luck. It's for me.*

—*It wouldn't happen to be a love letter, would it?*

—*A love letter.*

The white haze in my head suddenly dissipated.

I felt myself emptying out, becoming a hollow shell.

"When she took the letter she saw the name 'Kyoko,' written using the characters so much like her own. And at that moment, something that had only been a vague pattern within her took on a conscious form. *That's right. I'm 'Kyoko' Kuonji.* This was the birth of 'Kyoko': the girl who took the letter, who met and loved Fujimaki with wild abandon, and who ultimately got pregnant by him."

"A split personality. I've heard of that," Kiba grunted.

"A little different in this case from what we might call a 'typical' split personality, but yes. With that, everything changed. Dr. Sugano soon found his position threatened by this new 'Kyoko.' If what he had done got out, he might be hanged for all he knew. Unable to protest, he allowed her to use the room for her dalliances, and was even reduced to delivering tryst messages for her. Yet when 'Kyoko's' lover Makio despaired of marriage and left, she found she no longer required Sugano's services."

"So what happened to him?" The director seemed on the verge of tears. "You don't mean to suggest that she—"

"I fear we will never know what happened. Regardless, his fate does not bear directly on the case at hand. Yet, it was after Makio had left, and Dr. Sugano disappeared just after him, that the uninhibited, lustful, and above all else unpredictable 'Kyoko' met with the challenge of pregnancy, and proceeded to rend her newfound personality to pieces—like an animal."

"It was all my fault," Kikuno said softly.

"That's overstating the situation, but it is true that by emulating the actions of your own mother you passed the Kuonji curse on to your daughter. And that surely wounded 'Kyoko' terribly."

The old woman was silent and still. She did not even tremble.

Kyogokudo sighed deeply and sank down into his chair. "No one can actually give us a good definition for what constitutes a personality. Any given individual may change from one day to the next, or even from morning to night, sometimes only slightly, other times radically. Yet because one person-

ality flows continuously into the other, we perceive it as a single personality. Which is why it is a mistake to speak of someone as having one or two personalities. A split personality does not mean the person has two distinct sides, but merely that the disparate aspects of their full personality are hard to view as a coherent whole, or, indeed, are so divorced from one another they are totally unrecognizable as such. The whole idea that each person has a single, clearly delineated personality is simply a trick our brains play on us. It works when we can observe in a person a continual consciousness and the re-creation of orderly memory.

"Personality is an artifact created by our brains—specifically, the portion of our brains responsible for generating the conscious mind. If we want to understand personality, we need to understand this. We all access several different parts of our brains during our daily life, all of them linked together by our minds. Yet sometimes there's a bad connection, a break in the circuit. What if, for some reason, our minds couldn't access the portions of our brains we normally use, but only the lowest, most primitive regions of the hindbrain? Our personalities would change dramatically, of course. The nuanced detail and emotions of humanity would be lost on us. At the worst times, we would lose even the ability to speak. Reduced to instinct alone, we would act like animals. This is the state we are speaking of when we say a person is possessed by a fox, or a badger—an animal possession."

"Like Ryoko when she became pregnant..."

"So that's what animal possession is all about?"

"In part, yes. Remember that it's all relative. All of us forget who we are sometimes, whether due to anger or drink. Yet, when this state is still connected to our regular consciousness, we do not call it possession. Only when the change is abrupt, or it seems to an observer that more than one persona is involved, do we start thinking along those lines. It's not that the difference between the animal-possessed state and our normal one is all that different."

"Well, alcohol changes men, that's for sure. I've even heard some bark like dogs."

"Animal possession, however, is not the only sort of possession our culture recognizes. Sometimes, the highest levels of the brain, typically dormant, are activated. This is what we call divine possession. Here, the person possessed might have access to memories normally unavailable to them, or express emotions far beyond what we would normally expect. They may even seem to know that which they could not possibly know. They can see things normally invisible to them, and hear things normally inaudible—they hear the voices of the gods, and speak their prophecies."

"And that's all due to these short circuits in the brain?"

"What we must note here is that these higher-level personalities are inclusive of the lower-level personalities. Which is to say that when someone is

divinely possessed, they will retain memories of their normal state, yet, after returning to their normal state, will have no recollection of what transpired while they were possessed. Conversely, one 'possessed by an animal' will be unable to access their normal memories, but upon recovery, may dimly recall experiences and emotions from their possessed state. Of course, as these vague memories are not in accord with their usual behavior, individuals do not remember them as their own actions."

"So, the animal-possessed Ryoko was 'Kyoko'?"

"Not at first. I believe 'Kyoko' started out at much the same level of consciousness as Ryoko, or perhaps even above. Yet her delicate sensibilities could not keep up with the dramatic changes that come with pregnancy. And when her child—the headless child—was killed before her eyes, 'Kyoko' fell apart. She became a beast, operating only on instinct. She was tied to the bed, and subjected to the torture of having to look at her child's corpse, preserved in formalin, resting by her pillow. If it had been Ryoko in that bed, some sort of moral logic might have been effective in getting through to her. But this was an animal, 'Kyoko,' to whom such things were meaningless."

I saw something break then inside the old mother. Somehow I knew she would not cry, nor raise her voice in anger again.

"However, the real tragedy was to follow. Like an ascetic's fast, the days-long torture affected her mind—her brain, even. How could she escape this misery? Solution: her brain acted to save her mind by creating a *third* personality."

"What, so her personality was split three ways? Is that even possible?" Kiba turned to me for a second opinion.

"It's called multiple personality disorder. The personalities come and go, not just two, but three, four—there is no limit really," I told him offhandedly, wanting to hear where Kyogokudo was going with this.

"Ascetic practices like fasting are often seen as a way of training the spirit by punishing the flesh, but this misses the point. After a certain amount of time without food intake—that is, energy—an actual physical change occurs in our bodies, especially our brains. I won't bore you with the details now, but the end result is that the practitioner enters an elevated state of mind close to divine possession. Ascetics hear voices and see gods. This is where 'Kyoko' next found herself, quite unwittingly. 'Kyoko,' who came into being quite without Ryoko's knowledge, now unraveled without Ryoko's knowledge, giving rise to yet another personality."

"So this third personality—what was it?"

"Mrs. Kuonji, it was you who subjected your daughter to a torture worse than death. In order to break free, she had to become the kind of person you wanted her to be—and what better way to do that than by becoming *you*? Her third personality was modeled on you, Kikuno Kuonji. And not just you, but

your mother before you, and her mother, and every Kuonji mother over the generations who carried on the curse. She had to become the perfect Kuonji mother; it was her only chance at survival. And then, once she had succeeded at that, she went about her duty to carry out the curse."

"What did my daughter do?"

"From that point on, Ryoko became three people: 'Ryoko,' 'Kyoko,' and 'mother.'"

"And I'm guessing it was 'Kyoko' who stole those babies, eh?"

"Yes. Like an animal, the undone 'Kyoko' followed her instincts to find her child, and to get it back. That is an animal's motherly instinct. However, she couldn't continue on in that state for long. I'm guessing that 'Kyoko' got the secret of preparing the *datura* out of Dr. Sugano. She may have been administering it to herself. When the *datura* hit, her mind wavered. She went from an animal's motherly instincts to a human's motherly instincts, and then to something greater, a demon. The key word here is 'mother.' When the *datura* trance passed, what was left was neither 'Kyoko,' nor Ryoko, but this Kuonji 'mother.'"

So?

"So what?!"

"So, what does a Kuonji mother do when she sees a child? She smashes its head in with a rock."

"Wha-?" The old woman exhaled sharply, then kept exhaling until her voice had left her and, it seemed, her spirit with it.

"So, Kyogokudo, 'Kyoko' the abductor, 'mother' the murderer, and Ryoko the client—they're all the same person?"

"Ryoko would have dimly remembered stealing the child as 'Kyoko.' However, she would never be able to understand why she would do such a thing, or even how. Her own memories of her actions would be indistinct and dreamlike. And she would have absolutely *no memory* of what happened to the child afterwards. In fact, she might have thought you responsible, Mrs. Kuonji. For 'Kyoko,' the one who dealt with her children was 'mother.' No doubt she believes *you* killed them. Only when she is 'mother' does she know all that happened. Only 'mother' is guilty of conscious action throughout."

"What about the kids she murdered?"

"Probably preserved in formalin and put on display somewhere. That would be the only proper punishment for 'Kyoko.'"

"The infants in formalin—they're in that room, aren't they?" I said in a sudden flash of realization. All eyes in the room turned toward me.

Kiba leaned forward. "In what room? The little room next to the archives—that the one?"

"It's probably as Mr. Sekiguchi says. She locked herself in to the storage room right after Sugano's disappearance. So Ryoko—or 'Kyoko,' rather—must have the key. That room is her secret hideaway. That's where it all began. And that's where it all—"

"What kind of a person would do such a thing? It's inhuman!" Atsuko shouted, interrupting her brother. "I understand this 'mother' personality developed under extreme circumstances, but I can't believe she'd do such things without the slightest bit of hesitation. What mother could?!"

"I can think of one," Enokizu said simply. "She only did what her mother did before her." The target of his words was clear.

"But that...that was different," Atsuko protested, choking back a sob.

I could see she was trying desperately to protect something nebulous, without form: an ideal. Her brother would have none of it.

"No, it was not. We must remember that, of her three personalities, only one, Ryoko, conforms to our ideas of what it means to be human. Both 'Kyoko' and 'mother' exist entirely outside our society. They live apart, beyond humanity. Morality and reason mean nothing to them, let alone laws. Only they understand the guiding principles that drive them."

Kyogokudo stood once more.

Atsuko looked at her brother with the eyes of a child lamenting the loss of a prized possession.

Yet Kyogokudo kept talking, implacably following the trail of his logic. "'Kyoko' steals children, and 'mother' kills them. This unfortunate interchange of personalities did not happen very often: only twice, I'm guessing, while she was unstable after giving birth. That should have been the end of it. As proof, we have the following ten years, during which Ryoko was, for the most part, Ryoko. Yet, as irregular as her menstruations were, she revealed to us that, when she did have her period, she would lose consciousness for some time. These spells, I believe, were not full-fledged awakenings of 'Kyoko,' just hints of her re-emergence. She remained mostly dormant—until two years ago, when *he* came back."

"That'd be Makio Fujino."

"Of course, Ryoko remembered nothing. The 'Kyoko' that fell in love with Makio had been on equal or higher footing with Ryoko at the time, and not a subordinate 'lesser' consciousness, so Ryoko would have had no access to her memories. Yet *her* body remembered. 'Kyoko' and Ryoko shared the same flesh and blood, after all. They *are* the same, down to the very last cell. And so *her* body reacted to Makio's presence. Her hormonal secretions became imbalanced, and her menstruation cycle began again. The long-dormant 'Kyoko' reawakened. For the first time in ten years, she opened the door to that tiny room, and stole a child. Then, as she had done ten years before—"

"She killed it," Kiba finished for him, a violent look on his face. "And it

was Ryoko as the murderous 'mother' who finished the job!"

"Probably, yes. The only ones who know the method of preparing the *datura* now would be 'Kyoko' or 'mother'—the latter being above 'Kyoko' in consciousness and thereby possessing her memories. 'Mother' kills the child, puts it in formalin, then proceeds to destroy the evidence—namely, by administering *datura* to the child's mother, and thereby burying the whole affair in darkness. This is the only natural course of action for a Kuonji mother to take. After 'mother' left she trusted that you, Mrs. Kuonji, would go along with a cover-up, and indeed you did, to save face for your family."

"I thought—I thought I was acting of my own free will... But it seems I was only following the terms of our curse all along," the old woman whispered. Her voice was faint with detachment, as though she spoke of events in a faraway land.

Kiba sat with his eyes closed, fingers on his temples. He looked like he had a pounding headache. "So it wasn't just a coincidence that Makio joined the family and the children started disappearing around the same time. But what did Sumie Toda know, anyway? What did she have to do with all this?"

"Most likely she had witnessed Ryoko administering *datura* to one of the women. Yet Sumie was far less interested in what Ryoko was up to than what was in her needle. She made a proposition: she would hold on to Ryoko's secrets, if Ryoko would teach her how to make the formula. An agreement was reached."

"For drugs!"

"*Datura*—the Korean morning glory—is not all that rare a plant. It grows in the wild, and cultivation is simple. She was, basically, a junkie."

"And that's what killed her?"

"It's very likely."

It was raining outside. I guessed that the sun was nearing the horizon. It would soon be dusk.

What a long day it had been.

"Three infants were abducted and presumably murdered between the summer and the end of 1950, the year that Makio was adopted into the family. The fourth time that 'Kyoko' emerged came at the start of the following year, on the *eighth of January*."

"The day Makio died."

"Exactly. Now, the eighth of January is right after the year-end holidays. Everything would still have been shut down. I'm guessing there were no children in the hospital at the time, correct?"

"We had few enough patients on regular days as it was. I doubt there were any, no."

"So even if 'Kyoko' wanted to steal a child there were none to steal. Having no other recourse, she went to the room—*her* room. Ryoko was *in that room*

when Kyoko attacked Makio. The lock was open; she could come and go as she pleased. That room was not sealed at all. And so, tragedy struck..."

"Makio, stabbed, fled into the archives—"

"And Ryoko, that is, 'Kyoko' was watching."

The rain drummed so loudly in my ears, I could barely make out Kyogokudo's voice.

"When 'Kyoko' opened the door on that unusual scene, she first saw Makio, lying there, covered in blood. For 'Kyoko,' Makio was the father of every child that had been stolen, her beloved husband. And here he was, stabbed in the side. She probably ran to his aid. And what did Makio, his consciousness rapidly fading, see? That day, Ryoko was *wearing a kimono*. She must have looked much like the picture Makio held in his mind of his mother. As his consciousness flickered, on the brink of death, Makio saw his mother standing there."

—Mother?

"That was the trigger. In an instant, Ryoko went from 'Kyoko' to 'mother.' And to 'mother's' eyes, Makio looked like nothing but a giant fetus. So, as always, she *beat its head in with a rock, and sprinkled it with formalin*."

—Mother?

"After killing the child, what does 'mother' do next? Of course, she must punish her daughter for her indiscretion in birthing this enormous child. And so 'mother' punished the daughter—the real Kyoko—in the same way that her mother had punished her. She brought the bed into that room, and made Kyoko sleep beside the corpse."

"I get it... I mean, wow!" Kiba shook his head.

"I can't believe..." Atsuko began, then her voice choked and she was silent.

"It was at this point that the 'mother' personality began switching off and on with Ryoko; and because the 'mother' possesses all of Ryoko's memories, the switch would hardly be noticeable on the outside. I believe this switch has occurred several times since Detective Enokizu and Mr. Sekiguchi began work on the case."

"So what happened last night, exactly?"

"When I managed to induce a trance in Ryoko, she first switched to 'Kyoko.' However, 'Kyoko' only knows part of what has happened. Which is why I summoned 'mother,' instead."

"How?"

"Simple. I merely whispered 'mother' into her ear."

Get back! You're not the one we're here for!

Mother...

And Ryoko had laughed.

"So, could Ryoko see the corpse?"

"While Ryoko was herself, her brain would not allow her to acknowledge the preposterous reality of the body. Ryoko had no reason to kill Makio, let alone reason to leave the body in the room like that. Yet it was indeed she who had done those things. Without her, none of this would have happened. Were she to acknowledge this, however, Ryoko would have ceased to be Ryoko. That is why it was only 'mother' who could see the corpse, and not her."

I have to see Ryoko. I promised—

I promised to help her.

"Hold on, Sekiguchi! You're not going anywhere!" Kiba shouted, halting me in my tracks.

Aoki quickly moved between me and the door.

"Ryoko is a key figure in this case. We'll be doing the questioning," Kiba's voice was cold. With a few quick instructions, he sent Aoki to take her into custody.

I stood where I was, my legs rigid. I felt my back begin to spasm.

All sound had died in the room. Not even the noise of breathing would have felt appropriate in that place. If there ever was a time and place for complete silence, that was it, then, in that room.

At last the old couple rose and made to leave. Just then the door opened violently, and Aoki ran in, his face pale. "Sir! Ryoko's gone!"

"What?! What about the guard we posted?"

"Knocked out cold, sir! The room's completely empty!"

"Great..."

Kyogokudo stood. "Kibashu! There aren't any infants in this building, are there?"

"There was a kid born the other day—but I ordered the mother and child moved to the police hospital—they went, right?"

"Er, actually..." Aoki stammered.

"Actually what?!"

"The rain was so hard, the nurse recommended that we wait a day."

"Idiot! Go check on them now! If anything happens to that baby we're all

in deep trouble!" He turned to the other officers. "What are you doing standing there?! Lock this place down now! Don't let her escape! If so much as a puppy gets out of here I'll have all your heads!"

The officers dashed out of the room.

I followed along behind them, finally making my escape.

I had to see her.

I had to see Ryoko.

I ran down the stairs, cut in front of the laboratory, and ran outside just as I had done before.

The rain was coming down in buckets. I had lost my hospital slippers somewhere along the way. I ran barefoot, splashing up sheets of muddy water. I was running across the sodden ground, darting back and forth like I was dodging machine-gun fire. It was just like that day on the battlefield. If I stopped, or looked behind me, I was a goner.

I ran in a wide arc around the pediatrics ward.

I ran past the scene of the tragedy, the archives that had never really been sealed at all.

I had to get there first, before anyone else.

That room—

The outside door, its threshold choked with weeds, stood open.

The inside of the chamber was tiny, more of a closet than a room. A single *tatami* mat had been placed in the center of the room, and there was a small writing desk. On the desk I saw a familiar-looking notebook—one of Fujimaki's journals—and a bundle of old papers. Ryoko's letters to Fujimaki. And there it was—

The love letter—

Next to the writing desk lay a large torch-white flower.

A datura.

Next to that, pages bearing ancient secrets inside a box of paulownia wood.

And a weighty stone for crushing babies' heads.

All the fragmented pieces of the hospital's haunted reality had been collected here. The room was like a gallery of cursed objects. The walls were covered with shelves. There were medical instruments of all kinds. Everything was cold. Cold metal, cold glass, cold porcelain.

In the center of one shelf sat six enormous glass jars, an infant floating in each.

The one furthest on the left had no head.

The child with the face of a frog—

The one in the very center had a large mole on its forehead.

Goichi Harasawa's child—

I emptied the contents of my stomach on the grass outside the door. Crouching, I retched, again and again. I couldn't recall having eaten much of anything since the day before, but out it came, one powerful heave after another, until my throat burned like it was on fire, stomach acid eating into my esophagus.

I watched as the rain washed it all away. In a few moments it was gone.

Putting a hand on the door to steady myself, I stood shakily. Then, standing in the entranceway, I looked inside again.

This room was the curse.

Behind me.

Ryoko's behind me.

I felt the hair on my skin stand up straight. If I just turned around, I would know for sure. But I could not.

Then the presence I felt took shape, and the roar of the rain became words.

"I thought you would come for me that night. I thought you would save me from that horrible man."

What?

I turned and saw her standing there, her girlish face pale.

Ryoko—no, "Kyoko"—was standing there in the rain, clutching a baby to her breast.

It was her. The girl from that day.

The girl I raped.

She thought I would come save her?

No. This is no little girl. This is an animal. Her eyes—

"Step aside. That's my room. I'm going to raise my child there. You're too late. This child is *his*, not yours. Out of my way."

I stood paralyzed, rooted to the spot. A white mist filled my head.

I opened my mouth but found I had no voice.

I wondered where my words had gone.

"Out of my way!"

"Ryoko!" Kikuno Kuonji came running out of the mist and grabbed Ryoko by the arm. "You have to give it back! Give the baby back to its mother! Please, don't do this again!"

"Silence! Let go of me! I'll never give my baby to you! You'll just kill it

again!"

"No, Ryoko, no. That's not your child. You have to give it back!"

"All my children, you've killed them all! But not this time! Let go of me! Demon! Murderer!"

Mother and daughter fought over the baby, stepping closer to me. The rain came down from the sky in a waterfall, warping the visible world. A dancing spray of droplets shattered the darkness. I knew then I was seeing hell. I could hear the cries of lost souls. I stood there, unmoving, listening to their voices, watching them.

"It wasn't me. I didn't kill them. I—"

"Liar!"

Everything went white.

In the wash of brilliant light I saw it, clear as day.

Kikuno Kuonji staggered back, a sharp metal object stuck deep into her throat.

It was a surgical scalpel. From the cursed collection in the room.

I heard a whistling noise, like the sound of the wind. It was the sound of the air escaping Kikuno's throat.

The wind-sound became words.

"Forgive me..."

"Forgive your mother."

The scalpel flashed, slashing a clean line across her throat.

Still making a sound like the wind, and spraying blood, Kikuno Kuonji fell toward me. At last understanding what was happening, I reached out and caught her.

I heard the ragged whistle of her final breath leaking out.

Only moments after she had finally tried to become a true mother, the cursed Kuonji priestess died in my arms.

I looked up.

Ryoko was laughing. "Foolish woman. The Kuonji house does not need a foolish mother like you."

"Ryoko..." I managed at last. Even just saying her name required all my strength.

"I don't know what that babbling *onmyoji* told you, but this is the real me, Ryoko Kuonji. Stand in my way and I will cut you down. Now, move!"

"I...I don't..." I stammered.

Then there came an incredible noise from behind me. Several police officers came charging into the small room; they had broken down the door from the archive.

Kyogokudo was behind them.

"Ryoko! You must let go of the child. You cannot kill it, I'm afraid. You need your stone for that, don't you?" Kyogokudo pushed past the police officers and picked up the rock from the desk, brandishing it as he spoke. "It's tradition."

"I make my own traditions," Ryoko said, raising the large scalpel, stained with her mother's blood, and pressing it to the child.

"Stop!"

Three officers came running out of the new building. They were holding guns.

"No, it is you who should stop this foolishness. You could never understand why this must happen." Ryoko smiled thinly, her face a *noh* mask. She whirled like a bird changing directions in midflight to face the new building.

"Ryoko, no! The police—"

Ryoko hurtled into one of the officers with inhuman speed. She slashed at the face of another as he stood there taken aback by her sudden charge. The officer screamed, crouching down with a hand to his cheek. The third yelped and raised his pistol.

"Don't shoot, she's got a kid!"

It was Kiba.

He had circled around the back garden, bringing the rest of the officers with him.

The officer with a gun hesitated at Kiba's order and Ryoko flew past him, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

I ran.

—*I thought you would come for me that night.*

—*Save me.*

—*This is the real me.*

Who? Who are you?

What should I do?

What have I done?

The rain blew sideways, a driving sheet that hit me like a fist. Ryoko ran through it, the child clutched in her arms.

She entered the new building. I could hear Kiba and the rest of the officers closing in from behind. I ran. The rain came down so hard I could barely see in front of me. The mud grabbed at my feet.

Darkness does not exist only where there is no light. Darkness is everywhere. I knew this, because I could not even be sure of my own form. The warm rain—warm like blood—enveloped me, and I could not tell where I ended and the rain began.

I entered the building, cut in front of the laboratory. My sodden feet slipped on the floor tiles. I don't know how many times I fell, and staggered up again, before I emerged into a hall like a great cathedral. Rain streamed down through the giant hole in the ceiling, making a sound like the roar of thunder.

Just a few days before, I had seen a sublime ray of light, like one upon which an angel might descend to Earth, shining in through that very same hole. But now it looked like—

It looks like the end of the world.

That's right. Everything ends today.

I could say goodbye to this farce. I could feel the end coming, like a palpable tingling in my fingertips.

Where is Ryoko?

Above.

I dashed up the staircase, skipping two steps at a time. The rain came down through the hole in a torrent.

Where is she? If I don't find her soon, the police will catch up to me.

I reached the third floor, and found her at last.

Ryoko was standing by the edge of the hole. And on the other side—

Enokizu.

She spotted him and stopped, turning slowly around.

She was clutching the child tightly. Then she looked into my eyes.

Her hair had come loose.

Her face was pale and expressionless.

The veins rose on her forehead.

Her white blouse, soaked with the rain, clung to her. I could clearly see the lines of her body.

She was red with blood from the waist down.

She was beautiful.

Terrifyingly beautiful.

She was not of this world.

She was the *ubume*.

"Sekiguchi!"

Kyogokudo's voice, calling me.

The police officers had come up the stairs behind me. They held back, and Kiba and Kyogokudo ran out ahead of them.

"Sekiguchi! It's Ryoko! Don't be scared. It's just Ryoko standing there, holding a baby. You have to take the baby from her. Only you can do this!"

Of course. Because I gave her the letter.

I took a step forward. Ryoko took a step back. Then another. If she went any further—

"Give me the child."

"Mother."

See, I remembered the word. I remembered what to call you. I don't have to be punished anymore.

Ryoko's expression changed then, suddenly. She looked troubled—no, more like she was frustrated. Her lips parted as if she was going to say something—

Then she held out the baby in both arms and gave it to me.

The taker of children, the *kokakucha*, became the giver, the *ubume*.

As soon as I took it into my arms, the baby began to cry at the top of its lungs.

Ryoko made a gentle face when she heard it, then she began to sway.

She's saying something—

Ryoko Kuonji fell down, slowly.

Down into the abyss.

I never heard what it was she was trying to say.

The night Ryoko died, Kyoko, too, passed away, quietly following her sister and mother. She had suffered from no medical mishap—just a body so drained and damaged that the physician's report claimed it was a miracle she had held on as long as she did.

And so the cursed Kuonji bloodline had come to an end in the space of a single evening, leaving no one behind to bear the mantle of possession to another generation. It was the final chapter in a long, terrible history.

Fortunately, the child that Ryoko had kidnapped made it through the whole ordeal without a scratch, as did the child's mother and the attendant nurses. Only the police officer who'd been slashed was any the worse for wear, with six stitches to show for it and an ugly scar across one cheek.

I'm not sure how Kiba filled out his report on the case. The last I heard from him, he was moaning that he still didn't have any idea what had happened.

Perhaps the most troubling part of the whole affair for the lawmen was the collection of preserved infants. According to Kiba, only Mr. Harasawa took his baby back with tears of relief. The other two couples didn't even want to see them.

Not that I blamed them; they were probably trying to forget.
Or maybe, they just didn't care...

I wondered what would happen to the remains of the two who had died before the war, and to Ryoko's headless child. It made me sad to think of them.

Two days after that rainy night there was a small article tucked into a corner of the local newspaper.

"Missing Young Doctor Suffered Unusual Death"

It was with practically no emotion that I read the headline.

As expected, the article didn't even approach the truth of the case. None of the essential facts were there—the writer hadn't even managed to grasp a general outline. The truth had been abbreviated and misappropriated, reduced to a strange abstraction of the day's events: Ryoko died "in an accident," Kyoko "of illness," and Kikuno had "committed suicide." Three unrelated deaths, all in the same night. That seemed to me even more absurd than the truth.

What a joke.

I spent the four days after the Kuonjis' deaths crashing at Kyogokudo.

I didn't feel like going home. Or rather, I just didn't want to see my wife, or any woman—or any person, really. I wanted to withdraw inside the old familiar carapace of depression and pretend the world—the one outside—didn't exist. Yet somehow it never quite happened. I only went halfway, one foot thrust across the rift, the other firmly planted in the everyday, procrastinating my misery.

Maybe, I thought, maybe it would be enough to leave my daily life behind for just a little while. And so I stayed.

Kyogokudo would get up in the morning as always and head into the bookstore, where he would sit and read. After closing shop in the evening he would retire to the backroom and read some more, then go to his bed where he would read into the night. He went to sleep late and woke early.

As for me, there was nothing in particular I needed to be doing, and so I became the very picture of sloth, lolling about on the *tatami* day in and day out.

Three days after that last night at the hospital, on a hot and sunny afternoon, Kyogokudo burned all of Fujimaki's research notes in the garden. I didn't really care, but I couldn't help but feel it was a shame, somehow. After he'd spent all that time and achieved such remarkable results, it seemed a loss to the medical world to just watch it all go up in smoke. The results of his research and the events surrounding it were two different things. It didn't seem like Kyogokudo to confuse the two, either.

But when I mentioned this to him, he said, "Society isn't ready for this technology. And, if it should come to pass that we do truly need such knowledge somewhere down the line, when society is ready, someone will come along and figure it out again. There's no use for it now."

He was probably right.

"If you're burning things, why not burn the diaries, too?" I suggested. But it turned out that Fujimaki's journals had been confiscated by the police as evidence.

For four days, I followed Kyogokudo's lead and devoted myself to reading, finishing three books in their entirety.

One was a technical treatise concerning the preparation of pickles. The second was the canon of one of the new Buddhist sects, written by its founder. The third was a Chinese seafood cookbook. They were all books Kyogokudo had for sale, and none of them had previously piqued my interest at all. Yet I found all three fascinating, lending some credit to their owner's theory on the worth of all books.

Then I went to the shop in search of a fourth, and found the bookseller absent from his counter. In his place he had left two slim volumes—doubtless his current reading material:

Understanding Fox Possession

Fox Possession as a Disease: A New Thesis

I couldn't believe it. Wasn't enough enough?

"That right there is a very interesting book. The author of *A New Thesis* was a fellow named Kadowaki who used to be a clinician at the insane asylum in Sugamo. You've heard of it, yes?"

Kyogokudo seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

"If I ever did, I've forgotten. I forgot all that stuff. That's why I'm reading about pickles and fish," I replied. "Where did you get to, anyway? You abandoned your shop, you know. Good thing I was here to watch it for you or you might have gotten robbed."

"So I got a few phone calls, so what. One was from Kibashu, actually."

"What'd the boss have to say?"

"The results are back from Ryoko's autopsy."

Kyogokudo sat down at the counter and gave me a sideways look.

"Okay."

"Her heart was very weak. Turns out, it was just as much of a surprise for her to be living as her sister."

"I see."

"That's all you've got to say? After all those grand shows of passion? You don't want to know what else they discovered?"

I didn't reply.

Kyogokudo continued anyway. "The autopsy revealed a cerebral edema in Ryoko's brain—a very large one, in the vicinity of the hypothalamus. Her brain was under a considerable amount of pressure. You know what that means? Her cranium was almost entirely filled with water. What's more, it had apparently been that way from birth—a very rare case. She was pretty much headless in all but appearance."

"But she—"

"Yes, she had no trouble at all going about her daily life. You know, I think it's high time we revisited a great many of the things we think we know about the brain."

I wondered, not for the first time, how my friend could always say things like that with such a straight face. "Enough. Let's not talk about her anymore. And as far as her being as good as dead, I knew that from the start. She said as much herself." My mind was getting foggy. I didn't want to think about anything; that, and— "That, and didn't 'Ryoko' really die twelve years ago,

anyway? And her sister a year and a half ago? Who cares what chronic illnesses their bodies had when they finally went? *They* were already gone—long gone."

There was nothing anyone could have done about it.

"So, all that emotion was for two dead people, then? That whole performance, your current mood, all over some corpses?"

"Say what you will," I grumbled, suddenly hearing an echo of Naito's voice in my own. "The case is closed. It was all some kind of fantastical theater production for me. But now the curtain's down. It's time to clap and shuffle back to my old, boring life. Why dredge all that up again?"

"So, for you, this entire last week was just some fictitious piece of theater? Last week you were a performer, and now you're just an observer?"

"Yeah, that's right. It feels like something that happened to someone else, not me," I told him honestly. "Or no... It was more like the whole time it was going on, I was dreaming. That's how it feels."

"But it wasn't a dream. It was real. Ryoko Kuonji is dead." Kyogokudo lifted an eyebrow. "She was a human being of flesh and blood, just like you and me. Not a changeling, not a ghost; no resident of dreams. Cause of death was a spinal fracture, ruptured internal organs, and cranial fracture upon her impact with the ground."

"I said I've heard enough, please."

I felt nauseous.

The image of Ryoko's body seen from the edge of that hole was clear before me, as though cut into my retina with a sharp knife—even though the spray from the rain had been so thick I could hardly make out her face.

"It's all fine for you, Kyogokudo. You can sit there talking on and on as if none of what happened had anything to do with you, but I don't work like that. Sorry if you find it irritating, and I do understand how you might, but trust me, I don't care to see anyone just now. Or do anything. If me hanging around here is getting on your nerves, I'll go someplace else."

"Oh, I don't mind at all. Stay as long as you like. I'm merely making the observation that I find it odd that you have nothing to say about Ryoko, when only the other day you could think of nothing else."

"What's there to say? Or do you want me to go way back, maybe write some articles about how she was a rare breed of serial killer, or a demon, even? Would that satisfy you? *Ah, so good to have the old Sekiguchi back?* Now listen. Everything about her—everything—was so remote, so completely removed from my daily life. She lived in a different world from us, Kyogokudo. That's

why I have nothing to say about her now."

"You say it's removed but it is not. The everyday and the extraordinary are interconnected. Sure, what is unfamiliar might appear frightening when viewed from the safety of home, and conversely, I'd expect that our lives look rather foolish seen from the other side. But the two sides are not separate. They're one and the same, all spinning along with the world, come what may. The only separation here is a line our brains choose to draw between the two. It's not unusual for things to happen, nor is it unusual for them to not happen. All occurs as it should. There's nothing that is strange in this world, Sekiguchi."

It occurred to me that my friend was doing his utmost to placate me—talking me down, in a fashion. I got it. But what a clumsy effort! Logic is a crude tool to use for the mending of hearts. Except, perhaps, for the heart of the friend who sat before me. Kyogokudo seemed made of logic, sometimes. My own heart, by comparison, was a shady place, dark and murky, not the sort of thing that could be fixed or swept clear by any straightforward means.

"Maybe so, but what good would doing or saying anything now accomplish? It's not like I could win her a spot up there with the Buddhas by it."

"I disagree. When people die, they're dead. That's all. A body is just an object. It is we the living—you and I—who decide whether or not the person it belonged to becomes a Buddha."

"What do you expect me to do, then? How can I possibly help her? I've got a terrible track record at *that* so far, and the prospects for future improvement seem pretty dim, with her being dead and all."

"Think of it this way: now that she's dead, it falls to us to maintain her curse, or let it pass. It would be a simple matter to think of her as having been no more than a dream or an illusion. How easy to cut her out of the everyday, to separate her and put her in a place where she can do no harm. Yet I think that would be wrong of us. She was a normal human being, no different from ourselves. If we treat her as a special case and bury her in the darkness forever, then the curse will never be lifted."

—Free me from my curse.

I had almost forgotten. Ryoko's visage flooded my mind's eye; inwardly I faced her.

Not an *ubume*, not that young nymph from all those years ago.
Just Ryoko.

I began dimly to understand what Kyogokudo was driving at.

"Actually, I agree. I mean, look at me. I'm reluctant to go back to my real life. I get what you're saying. Unfortunately, I'm not like you. I can't just rise above everything like you can. I need more time."

Kyogokudo fell silent for a while.

I sat down in the chair next to the counter and watched the traffic on the street go by.

"I wonder what she said at the end."

It was the one thing that was still bothering me.

Had it been Ryoko who fell to her death? Or was it "Kyoko"?

Or was it—

"It was Ryoko," Kyogokudo said, seeing right through me. "She was thanking you."

"Why do you think she came to Enokizu in the first place?"

"Probably to confess, in part. Ryoko by herself knew nothing of what was going on, but her body knew. And even when she was Ryoko, that doesn't mean 'Kyoko' and 'mother' were asleep. Even when they weren't taking center stage, they were always in the wings. Nor was Ryoko asleep when those crimes were committed. In effect, when she went to a detective, a lower part of her consciousness was ratting out the upper."

"But, thank me? I didn't do anything for her. I couldn't."

"I think you meant a great deal to her just by existing. Things never would have turned out the way they did if you hadn't been involved. If you hadn't been in Enokizu's office, Ryoko might well have withdrawn her case."

"Why do you say that?"

"Her eyes, her brain remembered you. You, the one who came to save her twelve years ago. She wasn't looking for a detective; she was looking for you. Which is why, when she walked through that door, Enokizu saw the memories she brought with her, memories of a young Tatsumi Sekiguchi."

That's right. I remembered her, too.

Deep down, I'd known that Ryoko and the girl I'd met at the hospital were one and the same.

Maybe he was right.

"There is nothing more painful than to wait and wait, wondering if that day or the next will be the one when the inevitable breakdown comes. No matter how things turned out, you saved her from that hell. That's what she wanted to thank you for. That's what she said: *thank you*."

Kyogokudo smiled a faint smile.

It was all too much to bear.

"I'm not so sure. Maybe if we had just stayed out of it the breakdown never would've come." Hadn't the man sitting right in front of me said that a mistake on our part could have tragic consequences?

"Sadly, that's not possible. If Kyoko had somehow managed to go on with her pregnancy indefinitely, clinging to her husband's corpse—and if Ryoko had continued to watch over her as the elder sister, and torture her as the harsh mother—maybe they would have had a sort of happiness for a time, if you want to call it that. But only for a time. Memories of reality accumulate and weigh upon the flesh. Sooner or later, things fall apart. All we can affect is the way and the when of it. Perhaps she wanted to end it as she did, an active player, freed from the endless sweep of time. You did all you should have."

—*Save me.*

It was you, at the end, wasn't it, Ryoko?

I gave up looking for a new book and returned to the back room. The wind chimes, missing until the day before, had at some point returned to their old hanging hook. The sweltering heat of the day wept for a breeze, but the chimes did not ring.

Just a little longer, like this. Just a little.

I dozed for a while.

When I awoke, Kyogokudo was sitting in his customary place across the low table from me.

"Hey, Kyogokudo. You know, at the end, Ryoko went from being a *kokakuchō* to an *ubume*," I said, not really sure of why I was saying it. "They're the same thing, after all."

Kyogokudo nodded. "They were all *ubume*, you know: Ryoko, Kyoko, their mother—even Fujimaki."

Ting, rang the wind chimes.

"It's hot. It's really summer now."

I was sweating profusely.

Kyogokudo looked up, a scowl on his face. "Course it is. *Ubume* always appear in the summertime."

"The summer...of the *ubume*..."

"That reminds me. One of the calls just now was from Chizuko. She just got back into town. I told her you were here and she said she'd pick up Yukie on the way and bring her over. Apparently she's brought back a whole bag of treats and even a watermelon. Nothing says watermelon like this hot weather, and I figured with your little boy's sweet tooth, that might hit the spot," Kyogokudo said cheerily.

I stood abruptly. "No, actually, I think I'd better leave."

"Leave? Where? I did mention Yukie's coming here, didn't I? Not really good form for a husband to go home just as his wife's arriving."

Not yet. I don't want to see her yet.

I don't want to return to the everyday.

Even if everything that had taken place at that hospital was just another part of my familiar reality, I needed more time to come to terms with what had happened. Just a little.

I'm not ready—

To be honest, I half-expected my friend to stop me at the last moment. But he didn't.

I hurriedly thanked him for letting me stay so long and made an uncomfortable departure.

The dizzy hill shimmered in the heat.

Not a single tree stood along that tedious slope, nor anything else that offered shade. Just those endless, weathered oil-clay walls. Unfriendly barriers, behind which lay a cemetery, I now knew.

There are graves behind those walls.

I had walked about a third of the way down the hill under the unrelenting sun when I had a brief spell of vertigo. I wobbled and staggered forward. My eyes went ahead, down the road, and I saw a familiar shape: a woman in a kimono. I looked up slowly.

It was my wife.

She helped me right myself and said, simply—

"You must be tired."

Kyogokudo's wife was standing off to one side. I felt as if years had passed since I had last seen either of them.

"You really have to watch out for this spot," Chizuko Chuzenji was saying. "There's nothing along the road but these walls, so it looks like a straight angle down, right? But it's actually quite uneven, tilting side to side, and right here, it actually rises a little even though you're going downhill. But those walls just march straight along as if nothing were the matter—that's the problem. The tiles on the tops of the walls make a straight line, and on a narrow road like this your eyes can't help but be drawn along it. It makes you seasick when the ground beneath your feet and the horizon don't agree. Everyone who doesn't

know not to watch the walls gets dizzy here.”

Kyogokudo's wife bowed to me and smiled, a smile like a cool breeze.

So, that's all it was. Nothing strange. Nothing at all.

My wife was smiling, too.

Ryoko—would she have smiled if she were here?

I looked back and saw Kyogokudo at the top of the hill, laughing.

You too, huh?

It was nothing all along.

Thus I made the decision, as I followed the women, to ease myself back into everyday life. But it wasn't a farewell to Ryoko. I was taking her back with me to be wrapped, too, in the swaddling clothes called the quotidian.

I looked up at the blue, cloudless sky. The early rains of summer had lifted for good.

I stood, two-thirds of the way up the slope, and took a deep sigh.